

A muscular man with short blonde hair and blue eyes is the central focus. He is wearing a blue football jersey that is pulled down over his shoulders, revealing his well-defined chest and arm muscles. He is looking directly at the camera with a serious expression. The background is a football stadium at night, with bright lights illuminating the field and stands. The overall tone is dramatic and athletic.

FOOTBALL STAR'S
Surprise
PLAY

KATE LOVELACE

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Football Star's Surprise Play

By Kate Lovelace

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PROLOGUE

KYLE

I don't even bother sitting down or allowing myself to get comfortable. This has been the house I've lived in since I was a child. As is the case with many of the families here in Roseland, our homes were the homes of our parents, sometimes theirs before them. And I think that's how it's supposed to be. But this house is not my home, nor have I felt it has been for quite some time. The moment I am awake, I stay long enough to get some coffee in me before I leave—before I run into my father. No matter how early I rise, my dad's awake earlier than me. I swear he knocks off more chores at sunrise than most people complete in an eight-hour shift, just to rub it in that I don't do much. Or enough, whatever that is in his eyes, for he won't tell me. All he tells me is what is not enough.

I can't figure it out. I was poised to live large and well above the rest of the people in town, and yet, one by one, they passed me by. The Guys I went to school with are family men now and earn great livings through businesses they created. I'm on the cusp of thirty, from one of, if not *the* richest families in the state of Washington, and can't even move out of my parent's house on a job that was given to me.

Though I know something has to change, I take comfort in the familiar. Just as I begin to fantasize about noon, the time at which I take my daily reprieve from that awful job, there is a knock at the door. My ever-cheerful mother, with her hair and makeup done and dressed just so—and it's not even time for most people to be at work—answers. I am not curious as to

who might be here at this hour. It's the quiet that follows that has me move from the kitchen to the living room to look on.

It's a deputy from our Roseland's Sheriff Department, Pat Courtney. His shoulder is loaded with both a quilted diaper bag and a little suitcase. He has a baby in his arms. A baby. Unless my dad has been seeing someone of childbearing age on the side, no one has to say a word. Because I know. What Pat does say confirms that I am right on. I don't know how my mother can be so close to the child and be in such denial. But she is like that where I am concerned. She is as much my champion as my father is not. Still, how she cannot see me as a baby in this cherub is beyond me, for he or she looks just like me.

"Mrs. Ferguson, how do you do?" says Pat so respectfully.

"Come on in," my mother says kindly. "Who's that you have there, and would you like some coffee?"

Knowing Mom, she will serve it in a cup and saucer on a cloth-covered table.

"Well, ma'am," Pat begins hesitantly, "technically, I should be dropping this little gal off with Child Protective Services, who will place her in a foster home."

I don't even know the whole story, and already I feel protective of the child. I don't want that for her. I am suddenly aware of how little I do have it together. My first act as a father, if she is, in fact, mine, is to fail her. I don't know who loathes me more—me or my dad.

"What's her name?" I blurt out.

"Her name is Laurel," says Pat. "So we normally do take her to the authorities, but we are allowed to relinquish custody to next of kin, like say, the grandparents."

"Why?" my mother asks so innocently. "Why us?"

Pat eyes me as if to ask, are you really going to make me explain this to your mother?

"Well, ma'am, a woman by the name of Lorna Thompson," says Pat, "has named Kyle here as the father. I

think the birth certificate says Thompson as the last name. But Kyle's on record as the father. We'll, of course, require a confirming paternity test, but I mean, look at her. That's your face, Kyle."

My mother is staring blankly at me. None of this is registering with her. My father, on the other hand, has joined us now and has remained ominously silent. He gets the situation loud and clear. He glares at me. Naturally, this didn't make him happy either.

"How," I choke and try again. "How old is she?"

"She is six months old," says Pat. "I got her papers here in this."

He fishes around in a tote.

"You have to take these forms and see Dr. Safran at the Medical Center. He'll administer a paternity test."

"Can't I just go get one at the drugstore?" I ask.

"No," he says emphatically. "The state won't recognize the results of any test but theirs. The mother has already started the process so that will save you some time. She's named you as the father on the birth certificate but there's more to it than that. Dr. Safran will walk you through it. It's not his first rodeo. Anyway, I best be going."

I am usually not on a first-name basis with many of the women I sleep with. The age of the baby will help me place her mother because the name doesn't ring a bell. I am pretty sure it was a weekend in Aspen and an affair I had with a married woman. The only thing I remember from that weekend was it was torrid, and I was drunk. I don't need any proof but to look at the baby, but the reality clobbers me. I am a father.

"Guess I am not going to The Brick today," I think to myself.

KYLE

I call into the Medical Center in Roseland and disguise my voice. I don't know why because it's not like they won't know who I am when I walk in. I have to give my real name to make my appointment for a blood draw. For a paternity test, something I did not wake up this morning thinking would be on my To-Do list. But when I call in, I pretend to sound more like my dad because if my one-time fiancée Ellie Grey answers the phone, I don't want her blabbing to her superior husband and my life-long nemesis, that I got someone knocked up. I have so little control over my life. I want at least that.

"I can just walk in for labs," I announce, after some discussion with the medical center.

My mom holds the baby while my father puts the car seat in the car. He doesn't even trust me to do that. I am trying to see the bright side, that my parents launch without complaint into grandparent mode immediately. The baby may be an accident, but she is not a mistake, and I am happy that she gives my mother some much-deserved joy. I can't believe how quickly I am bonding with her as well, and I haven't had a chance to hold her really. My father gets in the driver's seat.

"No," I say to him. "There's no need for this to be a family affair."

"But affairs that result in a family are okay?" he snarks.

"Good one, Dad," I say blandly as he gets out of the car.

"We'll be back shortly, dear," my mother says pleasantly.

She slips into the backseat with the baby.

“I guess I am the chauffeur,” I quip.

“No, that’s an actual job,” my dad remarks.

“Oh John,” my mother scolds mildly.

That’s as close as she comes to raising her voice at anyone.

“Thanks, Dad,” I say dejectedly.

“You are going into work after you do this thing, right?” he asks, referring to my token position at the bank where a Ferguson has worked since the doors opened over a hundred years ago.

“No,” I reply succinctly.

If I said anything more than that, it would start an argument. I am not in the mood. I am in a hurry. All I want to know with scientific confirmation is that I am Laurel’s dad. It’s the only thing driving me. If I am her dad, she would be the best thing I ever did. I view this as a total blessing.

Roseland Medical Center is only minutes away, but I take a little extra longer because I’m nervous to drive with the baby in the car. My mother is in the backseat, singing the ABCs to her when I park. I am suddenly aware that the morning mountain air is a little cool.

“Think she’ll be okay?” I ask. “Is she warm enough? Do we have another blanket?”

“We’ll buy all that once you’re done,” my mother replies. “We’ll wait here. You’re not going to be long.”

I hustle into the medical center, see that Ellie is not here, which is a good thing, and I am shuffled off to a room. I am noticing all the women here are very attractive. First, a hottie takes my vitals – blood pressure, height, and weight — I guess they do that even with blood draws, and then I wait for the nurse to come in. She’s smoking too.

Now, I have been in some wicked situations in my partying days which would raise the hair on the back of most people’s necks. But I am a chicken with needles. I have to turn my head

as she fills vials. Still, I am woozy. I have to hold on to the table somehow. Mercifully, it's quick.

"Did you have breakfast this morning?" she asks.

"Na," I say. "I don't think I've eaten since lunch yesterday. At The Brick."

"Doctor wants to run a lipid panel," she says. "We can do that since you're fasting."

"Doctor, what?" I say crisply. "I am here for a paternity test. Not a checkup. I have people waiting outside for me."

"Understood," she says with a smile. "He'll be right in."

And after a few minutes, he is.

"Mr. Ferguson," he says, extending his hand to shake. "I want to talk to you about your test results. But first, say ahh."

He opens his mouth, and I do the same. He depresses my tongue with the dreaded tongue depressor and examines my glands.

"I know you have questions about the tests I'm running," he says. "My aim is to guide you towards being your best self, especially if you're preparing for fatherhood. I think it's time to reclaim the health you enjoyed when you were a star football player."

"Doc, that was a decade ago," I say honestly. "No one maintains the same shape they had as a younger person."

"You could," he says. "You should. It's time to relinquish the bachelor lifestyle."

"I hear that," I say, acknowledging the truth in his words. "But I'm here primarily for a paternity test."

"Understood," he says. "We've collected samples, and these will be processed through a state-contracted lab. Deputy Courtney requested that I examine little Laurel to ensure her good health before he brought her to you. Similarly, I want to confirm your well-being before entrusting her to you."

His words resonate; I do have a reputation in town. His concerns are not unwarranted. I've been considering making

changes, seeing everyone I grew up with reaching milestones that seem elusive to me.

“I’m listening,” I say, avoiding his gaze.

“I brought some pamphlets,” he continues. “They include a plan for diet and exercise. While you might be well-versed in fitness, it might be useful to go through these. Some others here are about parenting.”

“You think I’ll be a bad parent,” I retort.

“No. I want you to be the best parent you can be. This is all so sudden. Everyone,” he emphasizes gently, “could benefit from parenting classes.”

“Even if I am the father,” I ask, my agitation apparent.

His response is reassuring. “I don’t want to deter you from any assistance I can offer you to be the best dad to that little girl, but I do want you to wake up to the reality. Perhaps frequent the café more than The Brick, if you insist on dining out. That little girl has been thrust into a new home with new people. I want you to be her best possible foundation.”

Overwhelmed by a multitude of emotions I’m unaccustomed to, I reply, “I’ll look at these,” and leave his office.

My visit took longer than I anticipated, but my mother is patient. I want to take the baby to the store and buy everything she could possibly need. A wave of lightheadedness washes over me – a result of donating blood on an empty stomach, I guess.

“Everything go okay, dear?” my mother asks.

“Yeah, fine,” I say, secreting the pamphlets under my seat.

The General Store, the only department store we have in Roseland, is practically across the street, but I drive us over there. My mind fills with prayers for guidance. My health isn’t at its best. It’s strange how the town still vividly remembers me as a football player when to me, that was a lifetime ago. I’m aware of it, but I’ve got to do right by this baby.

“Dad put the stroller in the trunk,” my mother says.

She waits until I bring the stroller around, but it doesn't make sense to me.

"Mom, where's the rest of it?" I ask.

"You put the seat on it," she explains.

My not knowing an answer spikes my blood pressure, but I chill and ease the car seat out of the car. I have so much to learn. My eyes fix on this exquisite child. She looks like me for sure, but she is the most beautiful little person I have ever seen. I am in love. I find myself talking baby talk to her right off the bat.

"You shouldn't do that," my mother scolds. "It's bad for the baby."

"*You* were doing it," I argue.

She shrugs. I finally get to connect with little Laurel. I'm so proud to commandeer her stroller, knowing my mother is itching to.

"Now before we go in," I coach my mom. "Because we don't know for sure I am her father, we have to say we're just watching her."

"We might have to give her back?" my mother asks, her face wrenched with grief.

"We'll cross that bridge when we come to it, Mom," I say sympathetically. "But for now."

David Dye, the owner of the store, spots us right away. I know he wants to ask a lot of questions. Maybe Pat Courtney ran his mouth to David already. Pat lives at David's lunch counter like I live at The Brick, the local watering hole. Or did. Whatever David knows, I'm not entertaining it right now. I'll let Laurel be gossip fodder to the extent I can control it.

"Morning, David," I say civilly. "Baby section?"

He points. I know he's chomping to get a look.

"All the way over in the corner," he says.

I speed-walk the baby away. My mom is squawking for me to wait up. I do the kind thing and let her push.

“Here, you take her,” I say. “And then I’ll get a cart.”

My mother is already in the kids’ section when I arrive with the grocery cart, though she and Laurel are not alone. There with them is a gorgeous brunette, and my mother is chatting her up. I swear my mom has never met a stranger. Both of them are yapping away, the brunette reaching for something and failing, reaching and failing. She tries one more time, looks around, and then puts her foot on the shelf. She’s light enough, and the shelf might hold, but there’s no telling.

“Wait!” I order as I rush up behind her. “Woah, woah, woah. What do you want to get?”

“Baby wipes,” she says.

It’s a bit awkward that I have her fit body between me and the shelf, but at least catastrophe is averted. I take the wipes off the shelf and hand them to her.

“These?” I ask.

“No, the other ones,” she replies faintly.

I don’t mind that I don’t have to move away from her just yet. I have only one other baby wipe option, so I hand that to her.

“Thank you,” she says.

“You’re welcome,” I say as casually as I can.

“I always say,” my mother adds. “That’s why I had him. 6’4”, can you believe that? Played football back in the day.”

She makes me sound so old. I move down the aisle slightly and mutter under my breath, “What, is it hottie day here in Roseland?”

Oh no, she heard me. I can see out of the corner of my eye. She did a double-take.

“Kyle, by the way, this is Dawn,” my mother says. “Miss Moring. The new teacher at Roseland High. The one who replaced-”

My mother censored her reference to the recent scandal where the married gym teacher/sports coach and married

English teacher got caught in flagrante in the locker room and ran away together.

“You found that out all in the time it took me to get a cart?” I ask, and I say to Laurel in baby talk, “Silly, so silly.”

My first thought is there’s going to be a lot of boys with crushes on their new teacher. Then something randomly occurs to me.

“So, Miss Moring,” I say. “What do you think about baby talk?”

Dawn blinks at me like she doesn’t know how to take my question. Someone has a dirty mind, I think.

My mother interjects, “This is my son, Kyle, by the way. Kyle Ferguson.”

“So, what about it? Yay, or nay?” I ask.

“You mean for the baby?” she asks anyway.

I laugh because now I have a dirty mind.

“Yes,” I say.

“It’s good,” she says.

“Oh, it is?” I wink at my mom.

“Yeah, it helps you bond, calms them,” she says. “I know a lot of people think it’ll wreck their speech, but you never meet a thirty-year-old talking silly.”

“Under certain circumstances, you might,” I suggest wickedly.

Dawn’s beautiful face goes slack with shock and mediates what has otherwise been a turbulent day. First, I find out I have a baby, which I don’t regret, and then I find out I drink too much, which I do regret.

“Nice to meet you, Miss Moring,” I reply flatly.

“Dawn,” she amends graciously.

“Dawn is buying stuff for the classroom,” my mother announces.

I eye the teacher's cart and quip, "Where are the zip ties and duct tape?"

My mother and Dawn freeze, twins in their response.

"It's just a joke, ladies," I shake my head. "Lighten up."

My mother asks about Dawn's shopping.

"Baby wipes in the classroom for teenagers?" she asks.

"It gets the gum off the desks," Dawn says.

"Oh, isn't that clever," my mother says.

I have enjoyed meeting the schoolmarm and all, but I am annoyed. There are all these things for kids, and I don't know the first thing that Laurel needs. It's time my mother quit visiting. I'm not feeling great either. I think that blood draw sapped my blood sugar.

I bend over for safety clips and nearly bump heads with Dawn who reaches at the same time. We're aware and slow our motion down, rising cautiously, gazing into each other's eyes with wonder. I don't mind looking at her, but the timing is all wrong.

"That's twice now," she says, batting her eyelashes at me.

"What's twice?" I ask, playing stupid, but I do know what she's talking about.

"We keep running into each other," she says.

"So you do," my mom gushes.

"Mom, we have to wrap this up," I snap.

"Oh, I'm sorry," says Dawn. "I'm keeping you."

Honey, you can have me, I want to say, but again, bad timing.

I have clips in my hands. She eases them from me.

"These are great for corralling electronic wires," she says to my mom, but she intermittently looks over to me. "So good for your daughter and good for teenagers."

She smiles as she hands the clips back to me. I am not delusional. She's definitely flirting. I tell myself, she's also new in town, so she doesn't know of my reputation. She won't make this mistake for long. I watch as she bends down to get a container of clips of her own. She smiles at me as I unabashedly stare.

"Nice meeting you," she says.

"Yeah, we have to get going," my mother says to Laurel in her legal baby chatter. "Yes, we do. Yes, we do."

I take a few steps and the store spins. I grab hold of the shelves. Nothing flies off, and I return to normal right away.

"Kyle," my mother calls out.

"Mom, I am okay," I assure her.

I wish I did not have my gorgeous audience.

"Are you okay?" Dawn asks, touching my forehead with the back of her hand.

"Hello?" I ask.

She startles.

"Oh," she says and lifts her hand away. "Force of habit."

"He gave blood this morning," my mother interjects.

"Mom," I growl.

This woman will probably know in an hour that the Kyle she met in the General Store is the Kyle who had to take a paternity test.

"Go buy some orange juice and graham crackers," Dawn says, studying my eyes like she's going to diagnose me.

I dare look back at her, soaking up the unbelievable softness and kindness I find in her expression. She is a lovely woman. I am sure the kids are lucky to have her. Not the kind who would run away with the coach, I think with some amusement. Not the kind who would be with the likes of me. I'll probably forego the juice and crackers for a meal at the

café. But looking at Dawn Moring right now is all the medicine I need. In a way, an answer to my prayers.

DAWN

I took so much for granted when I transitioned to Roseland from San Jose. I assumed things here would be relatively similar to there. During my many interviews, all of which were conducted via the internet, the superintendent must have mentioned every five or ten minutes that, “Now, this is a small town.” Downtown San Jose isn’t exactly New York, but compared to Roseland, it’s a megalopolis. I think I’ve now seen the same three or four people over and over again since my arrival a little over a week ago, every time I run an errand.

Roseland is so picture-perfect and quaint, it feels like a movie set. The school arranged for me to move into a mid-century rental near the school. It sparkles, it’s so clean, but I don’t think a thing in it has ever been replaced. It’s so old and original it’s all in style again. It is perfectly charming and situated in such a way that I can walk anywhere I need to go.

And I have, except for today. I picked up odds and ends for the classroom. I should just go ahead and eat the groceries that I bought the day before, but I have gotten hooked on the Roseland Café. I don’t even have to re-park my car once I am done at The General Store. I just walk across the lot, and I am there. It’s priceless.

Esmé, the friendliest waitress on earth, is working as usual, and she seats me in her section. There are other waitresses there, but I don’t think I’ll ever meet them since Esmé always nabs me. I view her as the Alexa equivalent to Roseland. I don’t have to look up a thing; she’s kept me well informed on every random fact that crops into our profuse conversations.

I have been to the cafe so often now that it's not even habit, it's addiction. Esmé hands me a menu and tells me the fresh fruit of the day. If I were in San Jose, I would not eat out. I followed a strict regime of clean eating and exercise. I am adjusting to the altitude, so running is a little bit of a challenge here. And since I am new to town, I figure the cheat meals aren't counting. I cannot resist the chicken club sandwich with French fries.

"How does a little bitty thing like you stay little bitty with all these club sandwiches you're putting away?" Esmé asks as she writes down my order.

"Let's just keep this our secret," I say, telling myself this will be the last one. "I have to get settled in more and find my routine. I am splurging."

Esmé eyes me.

"You can afford it," she says.

I turn over my coffee cup.

"Coming right up," she says, pointing to my cup with her pencil before she tucks it behind her ear.

I am sitting at the table by myself again today. That is the only downside so far about my drastic move to parts unknown. I don't know anyone here except Esmé. But the truth is, I didn't know anyone in San Jose. Life didn't seem to happen there. When I got the call about working here, I thought I would try my luck here.

The brass sleigh bells jingle every time someone comes in or out of the café. I check the door each time, like I work here. This time, I am pleasantly surprised, though it should be expected. The same people I ran into at The General Store are here to eat. I have never seen them before, but that's the way it's been working. I expect I will see them regularly from now on. Mrs. Ferguson – Trish – waves to me like we're long-lost friends. Her son and, I guess, granddaughter follow her lead.

"Well, look who," she says to me.

Esmé charges over dutifully and greets them.

“Hey Trish, hey Kyle,” she says and then switches to baby talk. “And who is this sweet baby?”

“We’re babysitting,” says Trish cheerfully.

“Can we have a table?” Kyle says under his breath like Esmé is embarrassing him.

“Sure,” she replies, giving him a look like he’s a naughty ten-year-old.

It could be that I am getting a touch of the equivalent of island fever here in the small town, but there’s something about him. I met David Dye, who owns The General Store. Nice guy. But I feel the little zing that I experience when I encounter Kyle. I’ve always been a sucker for a fixer-upper.

I get that he doesn’t look his best. Maybe it’s because his blood sugar is low from giving blood, as his mom said. And he could use a shave. But otherwise, there’s a handsome face hiding beneath a five o’clock shadow. I am also impressed that he’s involved. He seems to have a relationship with the females in his life. Beyond that, I think I should mind my own business, but Esmé has other ideas.

“Cute baby,” she whispers as she brings me my club.

“Looks just like him,” I remark, indulging in gossip I just resolved not to.

“That’s just a coincidence,” Esmé informs me.

Now I am all ears, not even trying to disregard someone else’s laundry.

“He’s not married,” she says.

I’ve been single for a long time, and while I don’t share it, moving here I hope enhances my chances of finding that special someone.

“You don’t have to be married to make a baby,” I reply wryly.

She arches her brow at me.

“He’s a single man,” she clarifies. “He was engaged for the longest time to a gal who married a fella who owns the local

vineyard. But I don't think he was too broken up over it."

"Thank you, Esmé," I say as warmly as I can.

She is an astute woman, and she gets my meaning without me having to say it. I think that's going to be that, but I look on as Esmé and Trish chat. It looks like a definite scheme. Esmé approaches.

"They want you to join them or have them join you," she says.

"Sure," I say reluctantly.

I am not going to be here very long, and I do have to start meeting people some time. It's not just because I am new, but because I am a teacher.

People tend to invite me to meals a lot. Before I know it, Trish, Kyle, and the baby are descending, pushing a table up to mine.

"Sorry," Kyle says dejectedly, firing me a brooding look.

It's his way of telling me this is his mother's idea.

"It's okay," I say. "I think I have sat at this table by myself every day since I arrived."

"You said San Jose, right?" he asks.

You remembered, I think. The baby starts to cry, and Trish tries bouncing her a little to distract her.

"She's hungry," Kyle quietly insists.

"It's not time for her bottle," Trish argues gently.

Despite his mother's opinion, Kyle cracks open a bottled water and mixes up formula while the child begins to howl. Trish doesn't want to, but Kyle motions for her to hand the baby over. The second the child is in his arms, she quiets. It's astonishing how much she looks like him.

Trish seems like a nice lady, but I get the distinct vibe she does not like that he knew what to do with the child and she did not. After the baby suckles a bit, he thoughtfully asks his

mother if she wants to take over feeding her. He tries to hand her off, but the baby fusses.

“Okay,” he assures her. “Okay.”

“Well, how are you going to eat?” his mother sulks.

I suspect she takes it personally that the baby clearly prefers Kyle.

“Yeah, I have to,” he says.

Esmé randomly appears with orange slices. Kyle cuts his eyes to his mother.

“So, I mentioned you have low blood sugar,” Trish says guiltily.

“Thank you,” he says politely to the waitress.

His mother picks up an orange piece and begins to remove the rind when Kyle speaks up.

“I got it, Mom,” he says and starts sweet-talking the baby. “Can I put the bottle down?”

She coos and ogles him. His gaze does not waver as he slyly sets her bottle down. He thinks he has success, but then she wrenches up her face and bawls. He clearly has a low threshold when it comes to her.

“Let me take her,” Trish says. “She’ll just have to cry. You eat something.”

She lifts the baby from Kyle’s arms and walks her around before she heads outside.

“Oh my God, what a circus,” he says, like he’s surprised.

Maybe I was wrong to believe that Kyle was Laurel’s dad. Maybe he and Trish are just babysitting because they clearly don’t know her. He’s as green as can be when it comes to children. Little Laurel could be a niece or a cousin who just really looks like him. And yet, he is so distressed she is crying. That’s a dad move.

“Babies cry,” I assure him kindly.

“Yep,” he says abruptly and bites into the orange. “I could use about ten of these.”

Their orders are already up, and Esmé brings them to our table. The baby is wailing. All eyes are on him. He gets up to fetch his mom.

“Boy, everyone is looking at him,” I remark to Esmé. “You’d think people here never saw a baby before.”

“They never saw him with a baby,” Esmé amends.

“You sure have to watch your p’s and q’s around here,” I shake my head.

“That’s what Kyle does,” Esmé says ironically.

“What does that mean?” I ask, not following her at all.

“I’ll tell you later,” she says.

Kyle, Trish, and Laurel return to the table. This could not have been a pleasant outing for them. I find myself fixed on him, interested. There’s something about him. My heart goes out to him, and I’m not sure why. He stares at the food that has just arrived.

“How are we going to do this?” he asks his mother.

Esmé laughs.

“The same way people have done it forever,” she answers. “She’s big enough to sit in a highchair. Would you like one?”

I push my plate aside. I’ve had my fill of club sandwich and will take the rest home.

“May I?” I ask. “So, you can both eat,” I say gently. “I’ll take her back out if you like, if she cries.”

“Thanks,” he says.

Trish hands the baby off to me. He watches very protectively. He does need to eat something, more than orange slices. I don’t know this man, what his norm is, but he is pale. He and I gaze at one another as he catches me staring at him. There is such sadness in his eye.

I stand up and stroll around the restaurant waiting for Esmé to bring the highchair. I don't know when the last time I held a baby was, but she feels awfully amazing in my arms. I could weep. I have the urge to kiss her little head, but I can't because I don't know her. I don't even know the family. A busboy carries a highchair to our table. I walk her over and place her in.

"Now all we need are her toys so that she can entertain herself," I say.

"Toys," he rolls his eyes, like he didn't think of those. "We forgot toys."

"You left them at home?" I ask reflexively.

I actually didn't want to ask questions because there's a story that these two are guarding, and it's none of my business. I'm sure Esmé will fill me in the next time I get weak for a chicken club.

"We don't have any," he admits. "We have to go back to The General Store."

"You know where you get good baby toys outside of like a toy or kids' store?" I ask gleefully. "A drug store. It's the best place to go for baby stuff."

"But you went," Kyle counters. "To The General Store."

"I didn't need baby stuff," I wink. "It's okay. You know what they say? It takes a village, and I'm learning Roseland is very village-like. Do you have an empty bottle?"

"There's an almost empty of Grey Goose in my car," Kyle teases.

"Kyle Ferguson," Trish scolds, then answers me. "Yes."

She reaches into the baby bag. She finds a rattle and is beyond stoked.

"Eureka," I remark. "Now we don't need the empty bottle. The baby now has a toy."

"I feel like a total tool," Kyle mutters as he dives into his burger.

Laurel is quiet just long enough for him to make a good dent in his meal and gulp tea that Esmé brought to him. She's probably got everyone's preferences down cold. The baby fusses.

"Okay," Kyle responds immediately.

He unfastens her. I don't counsel him to not cater to her every little cry because it's not my place. And besides, his mother has beaten me to it.

"You'll spoil her," she says. "Besides, you need to eat. Get your strength back."

That's a telling remark. I wonder what his blood test was for. Despite Trish admonishing him to leave the baby be, she picks her up and sets her on her lap. These family dynamics are intense. It's not something I'm familiar with since my family and I are not that close. Fortunately, Kyle makes use of the moment and finishes eating. He guzzles his tea.

Esmé appears and sets their bill down.

"Can you add another All American on that, to go?" his mother asks. "It's for John."

"Sure," says Esmé and vanishes.

"You know Kyle was an All American," she says proudly.

"In college?" I ask quickly, perking up. "That's impressive."

"High school," he says quietly, like his mother has embarrassed him.

"Even more impressive," I say. "What sport?"

"Football," he answers.

"That would have been my second guess," I say.

He looks at me like I'm off. I'm not sure what's driving it, whether it's angst from babysitting or whatever his health issue is, but he's not in a good mood.

"Well," I explain. "I know you're a big guy, but you walk like a baseball player."

He lifts his eyes to me, studying me. I have just confessed that I was watching.

“You can read all about him at the school,” Trish continues. “He’s in their Hall of Fame.”

“Okay, Mom,” he smiles shyly. “That was ten plus years ago. I don’t think Dawn wants to hear about that stuff.”

“We can talk about the teacher I replaced and the coach she ran away with,” I beam.

He nods and smiles faintly. But he looks like he wants to be anywhere else but here.

“Wasn’t that awful?” Trish clicks her tongue. “Have they hired anyone for the coach?”

“No, not yet,” I say. “Not that I’m aware of. Fortunately, the year just started. But if they don’t find someone, they’re discussing not having a season this year.”

“So, they’re not having practice?” Kyle asks, with concern.

“I don’t think so,” I say.

“What a shame,” Trish says.

Esmé sets the To Go order down, wrapped up for carrying out.

“One All-American, medium rare,” she says.

KYLE

An old rock song with the lyrics “hot for teacher” plays in my head as Dawn strolls around Roseland Café, occupying Laurel while I eat. She is the epitome of wholesome, and that makes her so sexy. With the baby in her arms, it gives me a reason to watch her. With that thick hair and flawless skin, she looks like a Madonna holding Laurel. Maybe too good for the likes of me, but a guy can dream, and I’m doing just that. I motion for her. I wipe my hands off, ready to take the baby back. She has to eat too.

Dawn is less anxious than I am when it comes to the child. I act like she’s handing me a fragile egg, and in my effort to make sure Laurel is supported, I’m almost certain I grazed Dawn’s exquisite breast. Now, I’ve been a hound at times, maybe a few other barnyard animals, but that was unintentional. I don’t know what the polite thing is to do, or whether apologizing would make it worse or not. I opt to change the subject by focusing on setting the baby in the highchair.

The ploy works like magic. Dawn and I are in an instant huddle, fussing over Laurel. We look up at one another, our faces perfectly positioned. It’s like what happened in the General Store.

“Déjà vu,” she says pleasantly.

I make a face like that was a dumb thing to say. It’s essentially a flinch, and I know it. I’ve defaulted to my grouchy persona that I’m known for in town. The long and short of it is, I’m suddenly super self-conscious of how

unprepared I am to be so close to her gorgeous face. I'm not used to interacting with women outside of the bar scene, so I panic. I quickly amend my tune to something kinder.

"Thank you for helping," I rasp, as if that's going to make it any better.

I grab a few remaining fries from my plate and notice that Laurel's eyes follow my fingers to my mouth. I decide to share.

"Want one?" I ask playfully, handing one to her.

"No!" Dawn calls out and blocks my hand.

But the baby manages to break off a piece, and Dawn pries her little fingers open to retrieve it. I'm not sure I would have had the backbone to do that. Laurel cries, but Dawn talks her through it. She even tickles her while she's wiping off her fingers.

"It's okay," Dawn assures her.

I look on in horror, wondering what the hell just happened. My mother explains.

"You should only give her soft food, son," she says quietly. "Baby bites. She can choke on a fry."

I'm destroyed. Not embarrassed, as I might have been even a week ago if someone had called me out in front of the town. I do feel like all eyes are on us. They have been ever since my mother and I waltzed in with a new person in our midst—a baby, no less, who looks exactly like me. But no, this isn't about me looking stupid. It's about me being dangerous to my kid—well, Laurel.

I remember Dr. Safran's parenting classes. There's no question. I have to take them. I might even have to reach out to the baby's mother for a little background, which will be weird enough. Then it hits me: the woman who gave birth to her and presumably raised her since she was born had less care and compassion for her than this total stranger. That's when the full measure of Dawn's kindness sinks in. It's stunning, really. How one minute I find out I may be a father and the next, this angel is sitting at our table. Dawn's gaze connects with mine.

“Wow,” I say, making small talk that doesn’t even begin to reveal what I’m really thinking. “Certainly can’t zip into a restaurant for a bite to eat with a little one. Do you have children?”

It’s an innocent question that stumbles a little. It’s awkward.

“I have twenty-five of them or so at any given time,” she smiles. “Teaching at Roseland, though, will be my first year teaching teenagers.”

“Lucky, lucky,” I flirt.

My mother and she give me a look like my remark was strange.

“Lucky kids,” I say, pretending that’s what I meant.

“Yeah,” Dawn says. “But not kids like I’m used to. It will be new for me. I taught K through third grade back in San Jose. Before that, I worked at a daycare to help put myself through school, and before that, I was a babysitter. Caring for children is a learn-as-you-go prospect.”

I think I crush on her just for that—for not making me feel like a total idiot for making my mistake.

“I’ve been a mother since I was nineteen,” my mom chimes in. “I didn’t know a darn thing. Fortunately, I had my mother and my grandmother to help out. You’ll get the hang of it, son.”

Dawn squints, trying to work out what my mom meant. It did sound like she said I’m the baby’s father. I can’t unring that bell except to ignore it.

“Nice meeting you again,” I say quietly, after I throw down sixty bucks. “Come on, Mom. Let’s get Dad his lunch.”

Dawn and I manage to catch each other’s eye again. I’ve never felt so unprepared for an opportunity or for fatherhood in my life.

“You’re bringing your father lunch,” she says with utmost kindness. “That’s nice.”

“Yeah,” I say.

I want to say something like “yeah, then back to work,” but my mother blurts out something that shuts it down for me.

“Kyle lives with us,” she says, as if that’s an okay thing to mention to a stranger.

A lot of households in Roseland are intergenerational, but I’m mildly humiliated, and I only have myself to blame. I want to snap at my mother, but I wouldn’t, and I can’t. The truth is, right about now, had the deputy not dropped the baby off, I would be at the bar about two beers in. I look at little Laurel and have a sudden need to show up for my job. I can literally feel my priorities shift. I know my mother wants to hold the baby, so she carries her, and I carry our leftovers and my father’s lunch out to the car.

“Mom,” I say as we’re outside. “You make a terrible wingman.”

“A what?” she asks and then says what I’m thinking out loud. “Nice girl.”

It’s a hint, and I know it. I love my mother for believing that I’m dating material because I know that’s what she’s getting at. I don’t want to argue with her and point out all the reasons why that’s not going to happen. It does give me an excuse to fantasize about the prospect.

The last woman I dated who was sweet like Dawn, I actually proposed marriage to her—not because I wanted to, but because I wanted to best the guy she eventually married. That period was something of a blur, but I was engaged to her long-term. I wasn’t the right person for her any more than I am for someone like Roseland’s hot new schoolmarm. But it gives me pause to wonder. I start asking myself, what if I did clean up my act?

My mother and I drive past a string of charming homes, remnants of Roseland’s only stint at tract housing. They almost all have white picket fences. They aren’t my parents’ sprawling turn-of-the-last-century home, but they are sweet. It’s amazingly easy for me to see Dawn with Laurel in her

arms, walking me to the gate of one of those picket fences as I go to work. I laugh to myself.

“I still have a job,” I think out loud.

“What?” my mother asks.

“Mom,” I say, “I don’t want to presume that you’ll take care of Laurel when I go to work, but will you? I mean, until I can find a sitter, I guess?”

“I never had a sitter with you,” she says.

“I know, Mom,” I say tenderly. “But you were married, and I’m not. And I don’t want to impose on you.”

“Kyle,” she says, “this child is my grandchild.”

“We don’t know that,” I say.

“We do,” she says. “And even if she isn’t our blood, she was given to us.”

“Mom, the courts will want to confirm,” I say, my heart already aching at the prospect of her leaving.

Mom asks, “But when will you know for sure? How long do the tests take?”

“I don’t know,” I say. “I assume a day or two.”

I was going to share that one test the doctor discussed with me had the results in minutes. But it’s not a test I want to tell her about. I catch sight of myself in the rearview. I look like hell, and once again, I’m considering the classes the doctor suggested. I might need them more than I believed when he mentioned them. I have calls to make, and I really can’t make them privately at my parents’ house, which is where we’re pulling into now.

“I’m going to drop you and Laurel off, if that’s okay,” I say. “Then I’m going to go to work.”

My mother’s eyes widen as if I’ve morphed into a unicorn. I don’t actually feel well suddenly, and it’s not from the blood test. The restorative powers of the meal were short-lived. I hope it’s not some of the issues the doctor alluded to, that my partying days had taken a toll on me physically.

“You heard me right,” I laugh softly.

I walk Laurel into the house, following Mom. My father scowls at me, but Mom placates him with his lunch order. I hand Laurel off to Mom and unload the car of our haul.

“We didn’t get a high chair,” I say to Mom.

“Don’t worry,” she says with a big smile. “Your father is getting one from the attic.”

He cuts his eyes at me like I should be ashamed, but I’m not taking the bait. It only confirms that I need to move. I need to do more than think about it every morning over my first cup of coffee. I let his disappointment roll off my back because I now have plans. I’m going to find out about the test, see about the classes, and see if one of those sweet little tract houses in Roseland is up for rent.

And I’ll go back to the General Store. I’m going to buy a juicer and a pair of tennis shoes. It’s time, like the doctor said to me this morning, to replace an old way of life with a new way of life. I lean over and kiss Laurel’s head goodbye like it’s the most natural thing in the world. Tears sting my eyes because I remind myself that I’m getting ahead of myself. I kiss my mother’s cheek.

As I’m leaving, I once again catch my reflection in a mirror, this one by the front door for just this purpose. I do a quick about-face, go into the bathroom, and shave. The process gives me plenty of opportunities to study my face. I look way older than my peers. I grip the sink, bracing myself against a sudden urge to cry. I breathe through it. It passes. I dress and head out the door.

“Bye,” I say casually.

I almost make it out before my dad zings me.

“Going to the bar?” he asks sarcastically.

“I’m going to work, Dad,” I say and leave it at that.

It’s gorgeous out. The day warmed up from the chilly morning, and it would be the perfect day to play hooky. Or go for a much-needed jog. But something is driving me to go to

work first, after all. I mosey in, much to the visible surprise of my coworkers. Thanks to nepotism, I have a token position that allows me to draw a paycheck, but I'm hardly there more than a couple of hours a day. Certainly, I've never been seen past noon. Yet here I am, with a clean shirt and a clean face, ready to work.

I breeze in and spy a familiar and welcome figure waiting to be seen. Instead of passing the task off to anyone else but me, I greet her.

"Miss Moring," I say.

She blanches at me like I've scared her to death.

"I work here," I smile. "I keep turning up like a bad penny, don't I?"

"A polished penny," she replies sweetly. "Did you go to the barber that fast?"

"Naw," I fib. "I was thinking about growing it out but thought against it."

"If you want an unsolicited opinion," she smiles. "Looks good."

"So, what can Roseland Bank do for you?" I ask.

"Open up an account?" she replies.

In a panic, another employee runs interference. I know why he's doing this. Because at another time, I would have ordered him to.

But I assure him.

"I've got this, James," I say to him.

I have to repeat myself because it doesn't quite register.

"Wow," she says, flattered. "Eager employees."

"James isn't dumb," I venture. "Eager to help an attractive woman."

Silence descends, and I feel super vulnerable. I'm so unpracticed at customer service that I don't know if I've been

inappropriate. I find the nerve to check her reaction. She's smiling.

"When your mom said you were a football star," she says. "I couldn't really see it."

"I know," I admit. "I kind of looked like Sasquatch."

We both chuckle at that.

"Kind of," she says. "But now I see it. I guess taking care of a baby often means we don't take care of ourselves. But that just makes you a selfless father."

"I'm not her father," I snap without knowing I'm going to. "We're just taking care of her."

"I didn't mean to," she begins apologetically.

"It's okay," I say, closing my eyes and breathing.

Even I'm surprised at how fast I flew off the handle.

"I apologize," I say. "It's a sensitive personal matter. And you were great today. Thank you again."

She looks hurt, and she should. That's an appropriate response. She proceeds to very primly answer all my questions as I walk her through opening a checking and a savings account, though I discover in the course of things, her California bank is affiliated with our single-branch, tiny one. She could have just gone online and clicked a couple of buttons and been done with it.

This way, I know where she lives. As soon as her business with the bank is done and she leaves, I make the calls that I could not make at home. The first is to the Fresh Grocer to their floral department. I have a bouquet of pale pink roses delivered to her.

"Welcome to Rosemont," the note will say.

DAWN

Moving from one world to another, makes my head work overtime. It's been a long time since I've endured so much change. Probably the transition from student at San Jose State to teacher at the Santa Clara County Public school system. But moving places me in constant process mode. I'm progressing through the tasks on my relocation To-Do list, which helps me feel grounded.

Spending the last twenty minutes with Kyle Ferguson at Roseland Bank, face to face, just the two of us—no family, no ever-informative helpful café waitress—in what amounts to the third sighting of the day, feels more like a haunting than an encounter. I almost think the universe is trying to tell me something. I do enjoy seeing him in a crisp white shirt with a clean-shaven face. I can't believe, given what I think I know about small towns, that he's not married. He is obviously a family man.

While he is helpful with me and my accounts, he doesn't know what I know about him. My new friend and constant waitress fortunately wants to talk about him as much as I do. I'm armed with information as I sit down across from him. He fascinates me. For when the little family of mother, adult hottie son, and baby—however she relates to them—left the café, everything quieted down again. They had entered the store and the café in the same whirlwind. I credit Kyle with the dynamics.

“Thank you,” I say, as I officially have new accounts with his bank.

I leave him after that, but he doesn't leave me. I drive my car over to the school. It's after hours now, but there's always someone there, so I won't be by myself. And of course, Kyle Ferguson is seated squarely in my head, so I feel like I have company. I load up a laundry basket that I stow in my trunk for transporting things. I drop off the supplies to my classroom.

The world outside the school might be a little different from San Jose, but inside it's nearly identical. With the high-gloss painted cinder blocks and waxed-shiny linoleum floors, I could be back in California, for it's all the same. I set the basket down, unlock my empty classroom, and contemplate lunch earlier that day.

Esmé cleared my plate when I finally got to eat and brushed the table with a little gadget she carries in her apron. She's constantly in motion at the café, which answers my question about how or why someone a little bit older like herself would be working as hard as she does all the time. Roseland is affordable; she could slow it down.

"So, what did you think of that?" she asks me after Kyle and his crew leave.

She flares her eyes as if to ask, have you ever?

Then she flits off to another table, leaving me to think about what indeed I thought about that—the commotion of the little family. Every chance Esmé gets, she returns to me to chat some more.

"So that isn't his daughter?" I double down because I would swear that she is. "Because, man, for a child he didn't father, she sure looks just like him."

"I would know," she says to me. "The whole town would. I would tell you. As far as I know, he's not been involved with anyone in a while. He was engaged for the longest time to a gal who married his rival."

When I met with him at the bank, I felt a little ashamed that I knew so much about him. Esmé and I basically covered his entire life when he left the café, as thoroughly as one of my

class lectures. I learned that he had been engaged, but she left him.

“Ouch,” I say when Esmé tells me that.

My heart aches for the guy. I feel I understand the sadness in his eyes.

“That sucks,” I say to her.

I have never loved and lost, so I don’t know. I’ve read a lot about it in my literature studies but never lived it. I was hoping to find some of that here.

“It was a good thing, the breakup I mean,” Esmé counsels me. “For everyone. Nice people all the way around, including Kyle when he wants to be. She’s a nurse over at the medical center if she’s working. She has a little one now.”

I ask her lightheartedly, “Do I need to submit my bio in case anyone asks about me?”

“Sorry,” she touches her fingers to her lips like she should be quiet. “I get to talking.”

“No, no,” I say. “I’m weak for local lore and totally interested. I’m an English teacher. I love a good story.”

And it’s true. There’s no need to pretend like we’re contrite when it comes to talking about others. I know when I return to the café next, this will happen all over again. Besides, she has useful information.

“You’re heading over to the bank?” she asks me as I pay my check. “If you’re looking for, you know who, he hates that job.”

I smile.

“Why would I be looking for him?” I protest a little too much.

I’m probably not fooling her.

“Hey,” she says. “He’s a good-looking guy. Comes from a good family. Has a great job when he goes there. I’m just saying, if you’re hoping to see him at that job, you have to catch him before noon. You won’t see him now.”

That was the only thing Esmé was wrong about so far. I did see him. And I feel oddly special that as I am waiting, he spots me and volunteers to open up my account for me. And now I am at the school, as soon as I am able, I'm going to check out the trophy cases for any reference to him. Surely, since he graduated, there have been other remarkable athletes who are now showcased. He would have to be really something to still have a place in the limited space. But his mother says he's there, so I'm going to look.

I find him. I weave around the empty halls, still familiarizing myself with the floor pattern. I know I've seen the trophy cases somewhere. I come to just outside the gymnasium. There they are. I see the most recent year prominently displayed, and then cases for different categories, like special players. Kyle is one of them. Roseland's All-American. I'm smiling ear to ear, crushing. I bend down and scan the pictures for a resemblance to the handsome, now clean-shaven face who processed my checking and savings. There's a really clear 8 x 10. It looks like a still from a classic movie; it's such a flattering image.

"My word," I say out loud.

He is handsome now, as Esmé says, but younger Kyle is off the hook. I stare at the picture through the glass. There is no question; I see Laurel in his face. He looks like an age-enhanced boy version of the baby that the family claims they are just babysitting. In San Jose, no one would go to the trouble of making up a tale about how a family suddenly had a baby when no marriage had taken place. But Esmé, who is quick with lurid speculations about the town's former teacher and coach, maintains that Laurel is new to Roseland, new to the Ferguson household. I never spent so much effort wondering about people I hardly know, but I am dying to know more.

I check the halls again, like I am going to get caught. No one is around but me. I have to look at this gorgeous picture up close. With the caution of a burglar, I try the handle on the display case in hopes that it is not locked. I don't know why I

feel like I am sneaking. I am a teacher; I have authority to do this. And yet I am trembling.

The case is indeed unlocked. My heart races as I gingerly reach for the picture behind the collection of awards. I hold the portrait of a young and vibrant Kyle Ferguson, in his football uniform, including his jersey. The sunlight shines on his lustrous hair and healthy, handsome face. He had to be every high school girl's crush. I am enamored. I am glad I am alone; I feel a little foolish.

In a small town that is given to report everyone's business, I dare not get caught admiring the picture a little too closely. I carefully put the picture back. Knowing the actual story behind why there was a vacancy for me to fill, I am keen on how easily a common human occurrence such as an affair can be blown up into a major scandal in a small town like this. I replaced a teacher who had the hots for the football coach. Me, as the new teacher, seen creeping on a football star's photo would be a rerun for Roseland.

After I carefully close the cabinet so that nothing teeters over as I do, I retrace my steps to my classroom to double-check everything is locked up. It's not the outside world I have to secure against. It probably isn't the case here, but in San Jose, teachers filched from one another. My new boxes of chalk, which I marked, ended up in the rooms of colleagues. I can't afford right now to buy supplies twice, let alone for all the teaching staff.

I pass the administrator's office on my way. Out of habit, I peer in. I shouldn't be surprised, but the principal is at his desk, still working. I have an idea about the coaching vacancy, and I want to pitch it to him. And I do just want to check in with him since it's been a while since we connected.

I gently knock. I smile inside when I think of the story I was fed about why they needed a new English teacher. They led me to believe the woman had a mysterious illness. It turns out she was just horny.

"Miss Moring," the principal says wearily, though he smiles.

He is a tall, light-skinned Black man with the vibe of everyone's good father. I liked him right away. The sense of his dedication was like another person in the interview. He didn't have to espouse it – it was obvious. All types can be teachers. Dr. Davidson is one of the good ones. And he makes notes with a pen and not a computer. He's one of the reasons I know I am going to really like my job here.

"I am so sorry to interrupt you," I say, though I am really glad to see him.

"No, please," he says. "You're on my To-Do list."

I laugh.

"We are all alike, aren't we?" I joke.

"Yes," he smiles and nods. "Can't get by without our To-Do lists. Getting settled in?"

"I am," I say. "I feel like I am meeting the same two or three people over and over again."

"Welcome to small-town America," he says, his chest warmly rumbling.

"One of the people I've met," I begin, "is a man by the name of Kyle Ferguson."

Dr. Davidson has a great sense of humor. He very theatrically clutches the desk.

"Maybe you should be talking to the police instead of me," he jokes.

At least I think he's joking.

"What?" I ask, confused. "No, I saw him featured in the trophy displays."

"Yes," he concedes. "He was a stellar athlete back in the day."

"Well, I was thinking," I say. "Have you filled the coaching position?"

"Yes," he says matter-of-factly. "I have. Literally. Me. I have been filling in just to keep our prospects of a season

alive. Sports are a big deal around here.”

It really goes over his head what I am suggesting. I have to spell it out for him.

“What I mean is,” I say, “you have an All-American here in Roseland. A high school All-American. Even on a substitute teaching basis, why not hire him?”

The kind, soft-spoken, ultra-patient Dr. Davidson’s face is slack, like I said something scary.

“I appreciate your wanting to be helpful,” he says. “And that’s part of the team spirit we like to foster in Roseland Public Schools. I would hire back-in-the-day Kyle Ferguson in a heartbeat. But that Kyle is gone. He might as well have left town.”

“Oh,” I say, surprised that that is someone’s take.

I guess Esmé didn’t tell me that part. I didn’t mind talking about him when the conversation was like the harmless content of a fan magazine. But I don’t want to know about someone’s foibles or mistakes. Not when that person is not here to defend himself.

“He and his family are the few people I mentioned that I keep meeting over and over,” I explain. “The way he fusses over that baby and relates to his mom.”

Dr. Davidson cuts me off.

“Baby?” he says.

“Yeah, they’re babysitting,” I explain. “Well, when I heard such amazing things about him and his football history, I thought of the coaching position. With all due respect, Dr. Davidson, achieving All-American status as a high schooler is evidence of rare talent. I don’t know about the other stuff, or why he’s not in athletics now, but he’s right here. He looks like he was a good citizen once. His interaction with his family, to me, says he still is. Unless you really like working all day, coaching, and then coming back to your desk to catch what you might have overlooked.”

When I met him at the bank, I felt a little ashamed that I knew so much about him. Esmé and I had basically covered his entire life when he left the café, as thoroughly as one of my class lectures. Knowing that he had been engaged but that she left him made my heart ache for the guy. I could sense the sadness in his eyes. “Ouch,” I said to Esmé. “That sucks.” I had never loved and lost, so I didn’t know. I had read a lot about it in my literature studies, but I had never experienced it myself. I was hoping to find some of that here.

“It was a good thing, the breakup I mean,” Esmé counseled me. “For everyone. Nice people all the way around, including Kyle when he wants to be. She’s a nurse over at the medical center if she’s working. She’s a little one now.”

“Do I need to submit my bio in case anyone asks about me?” I asked her lightheartedly.

“Sorry,” she said, touching her fingers to her lips like she should be quiet. “I get to talking.”

“No, no,” I said. “I am weak for local lore and totally interested. I am an English teacher. I love a good story.” There was no need to pretend that we were contrite when it came to talking about others. I knew that when I returned to the café next, this would happen all over again. Besides, she had useful information.

“You’re heading over to the bank?” she asked me as I paid my check. “If you’re looking for you-know-who, he hates that job.”

“Why would I be looking for him?” I protested a little too much. I probably wasn’t fooling her.

“Hey,” she said. “He’s a good-looking guy. Comes from a good family. Has a great job when he goes there. I am just saying, if you’re hoping to see him at that job, you have to catch him before noon. You won’t see him now.”

That was the only thing Esmé was wrong about so far. I did see him, and I felt oddly special when, as I was waiting, he spotted me and volunteered to open up my account for me. Now that I was at the school, as soon as I was able, I was

going to check out the trophy cases for any reference to him. Surely, since he graduated, there had been other remarkable athletes who were now showcased. He would have to be really something to still have a place in the limited space. But his mother said he was there, so I was going to look.

I found him. I weaved around the empty halls, still familiarizing myself with the floor pattern. I knew I had seen the trophy cases somewhere. I came to just outside the gymnasium, and there they were. I saw the most recent year prominently displayed, and then cases for different categories, like special players. Kyle was one of them: Roseland's All-American. I was smiling ear to ear, crushing. I bent down and scanned the pictures for a resemblance to the handsome, now clean-shaven face who processed my checking and savings. There was a really clear 8x10. It looked like a still from a classic movie, it was such a flattering image.

“My word,” I said out loud. He was handsome now, as Esmé said, but younger Kyle was off the hook. I stared at the picture through the glass.

KYLE

I t's been a couple of days now since I took the paternity test. All the tests have come in. I am low on just about every critical nutrient there is, and as Dr. Safran tactfully put it, that's a direct result of my bachelor lifestyle. He prescribed multivitamins for me and sent over a diet.

"Diet?" I exclaim, reading out loud. "The doctor sent me a grocery list."

My mom peeks at it and laughs at the doctor's remark.

"The only thing you have to change is everything," she cackles.

"Ha, ha," I say. "I got everything back but the paternity. I'll call them."

She knows, and I know, that I have called every day since my blood was drawn, but I am calling again. I make a conscious effort to be pleasant since my go-to is belligerence. I want to change that for Laurel.

"Hi, this is Kyle Ferguson," I say. "I got the results of my blood work, most of it. I am signed up for the parenting classes starting next week. I think you forgot about the paternity test."

"Mr. Ferguson," she says, "that result won't be available for at least thirty days. I'm sorry if this was not made clear to you."

My resolve to maintain decency threatens to dissipate, like a helium balloon slipping from my grasp.

“I have been calling every day,” I retort. “Not once was I informed that this specific test would take a month. I was always told, ‘Call back tomorrow.’”

“We apologize for the miscommunication,” the woman responds.

“I want to know who I spoke with! The one who assured me my paternity test would be back in a few days!” I exclaim. “I want her to be held accountable!”

“Mr. Ferguson,” she retorts calmly, “raising your voice won’t expedite the results. The person you spoke to was likely referring to your general tests. Regrettably, we must follow the state’s protocol, which can actually span several months. As the mother initiated the process, your results might arrive a bit earlier. If you have any further questions, you can call the State Department of Health. Have a good day, sir.”

The call ends abruptly. I find myself glaring at my cell phone, clutching it as though it were someone’s throat. My blood pressure is surging. Then, something shifts. Catching my reflection in the sliding glass door, I see how absurd I look—how absurd I am. I’m throwing a tantrum over finding out whether a drunken weekend resulted in a child. I dial the number again and apologize to the person answering the phones at the medical center. Then, I head back inside.

My mother is setting the dinner on the table, and I haven’t lifted a finger to help. She has also been shouldering most of the responsibility for caring for Laurel. The sweet little girl is in her highchair, patiently awaiting dinner, watching my mother—her grandmother—set the table. A voice within prompts me to express gratitude. I lean over and plant a kiss on my mom’s cheek.

“Thanks,” I utter in a hoarse whisper.

She turned to me and saw that I was emotional like it was a complete and random surprise.

“Everything okay?” she asked.

That’s my mom. I could wrap a car around a tree, and she would be the first one to say, “Well, I don’t know what the big

deal is.”

“I won’t know for sure if I am Laurel’s dad for a couple more weeks,” I say. “More like a month.”

“Don’t you worry, son,” she says. “We’re her family.”

“So anyway,” I say. “Parenting classes start next week.”

“Why do you have to go to those?” she asks. “I am here.”

“I know that,” I say.

I could probably just turn over everything to my mother, who is falling in love with her as much as I am, but I have to show up, literally. I am so insecure with this parenting stuff that I have to take these classes or become a totally neurotic mess.

“I think it’s important,” I say. “I don’t know how you guys did this. I am a nervous wreck.”

“We’re in this together, son,” my mother says.

Meanwhile, my father is a stone wall. He meanders in and sits next to the baby. He puts his hand on her highchair tray. Though I see what’s happening. They’ve developed a game. She holds onto the index finger of the hand he doesn’t eat with. Despite his grumping around, he too is soft on her.

“How about you sit, Mom,” I say. “I’ll bring dinner to the table.”

I wait for my dad to make a sarcastic remark about me doing too little too late, but it doesn’t come. Mom and Dad sit on either side of Laurel, and they fuss over her. Feeding her carefully. Playing with her. I let them because they love it so much, and this way, I can watch her. She’s so beautiful.

Dinner is almost done, and I break a cardinal rule. I check my phone at the table. My mother scolds me. This is her only pet peeve.

“This is good, Mom,” I say. “I ordered something from The General Store. It’s a stroller.”

“We have one,” she says.

“This is so I can take her for runs,” I say.

“You don’t run,” my dad says snidely.

“You’re right, Dad, I don’t,” I say civilly instead of saying something like, neither do you. “I thought I would start it up again. I got to break in these tennis shoes I bought.”

“What did you buy for the baby?” he asks, trying to push my buttons.

“The stroller is for us,” I say.

I clear my plate and everyone else’s, but I have to get to the store.

“Mom, can you watch her for about a half an hour?” I ask.

“You’re like a broken record,” my dad snips. “I think that’s the only thing you say anymore.”

“I can take her,” I say.

I am trying not to play into his taunting or to take his bait. I am annoyed and I am prepared to take her to spite him, but I am polite.

“No, no, dear,” my mother protests gently. “It’s her bedtime.”

“She is my daughter,” I say. “I can take her, we’ll pick up the stroller, and when I get back, I will put her to bed.”

“I just meant that you ask your mother to watch her all the time,” my father says, clearly backtracking.

He cannot look me in the eye.

He says, “I am happy to watch her.”

“We will take care of her together,” my mother says.

I don’t want to cause a fight. Despite our little war of words, the atmosphere is not tense.

“Thank you,” I say.

I grab my keys and wallet.

“I will be back as quickly as I can,” I say. “We’ll settle into a routine, so I won’t have to prevail upon you two so much.

Thank you for taking care of her.”

I don’t know where that is coming from. It’s like some nice guy gets inside my body and starts using my mouth. I never used to be like that. Well, I was, and then I changed. And now I want to change back. Before Laurel, I would have bickered with my father into the ground just so I could storm off and hang out at The Brick. But nowadays, I open my mouth and reason comes out.

I drive out to The General Store with about twenty minutes left before it closes. David Dye, who owns both this and the Fresh Grocer, does me a solid and waits for me personally. And I have been crappy to him in the past. I think the last awful thing I did was hit on his underage register girl.

“Thanks, man,” I say. “This came in quick.”

“Yeah,” he says, almost as excited as I am that the stroller came in.

“I don’t know if she’s too little for it or not,” I say, looking at the picture on the box.

“She won’t be for too long,” he says.

“No,” I say. “Probably not.”

“How are the shoes?” he asks.

“They work for walking so far,” I joke. “Haven’t taken them for a spin yet. Tomorrow for sure.”

“Jaxon Grey has a full-on gym over at the vineyard,” he says. “If you’re cool with it, I am sure he wouldn’t mind.”

That would be a complete about-face if true. Since high school, Jaxon and I have been rivals. Either he was the star of the football team, or I was. Either he was dating Ellie, or I was. He ended up marrying her, and that was all for the best, but I am not sure if there’s an olive branch with my name on it.

“That’s real nice of you,” I say. “I may go bug the school to see if they’ll let me use their stuff. When I get to that stage.”

“Sure,” he says.

I get the stroller home and into the house easily. The box is lightweight. The kitchen table, which is farmhouse style so it's super long, is clear, so I can put the box on it. Just as I am fishing in the kitchen drawer for something to open the box, I get a call. I read the name.

"Roseland Public Schools?" I say, and then I get super excited.

I think it's Dawn somehow.

"Kyle Ferguson," I answer.

"Tom Davidson," says the caller. "Principal at Roseland High."

"Boy, you're working awfully late," I say.

"Oh, is it too late to call?" he says apologetically. "I can call another time."

"No, sir," I say, again being polite when that is just not me. "What can I do for you?"

In truth, though, I was itching to put the stroller together. My dad and mother come in. I point to the box with the stroller so they can look at it, and I go outside for privacy.

"As you may know," the principal says. "We are looking for a coach for football."

"Yes, I did hear about that," I say.

"I've been doing my best to lead the team through drills," he says.

"You?" I blurt out. "I mean, I didn't know you had experience."

"I don't," he says. "And every muscle in my body is letting me know that."

I laugh.

He continues, "So that's why I am calling you."

My heart sinks. I don't want this guy to ask me to do what I think he is about to ask me to do because I won't be able to say no. I don't want to say yes. I will put my responsibility hat

on for Laurel, but it wasn't too long ago that I eased in and out of my day with as few obligations as possible. Now it feels like the whole world wants me to show up and participate.

"It would be temporary, of course," he says. "Until we found someone permanent. I would like to have a commitment of the full season. But at this point, I am flexible."

I have never met the principal, but he sounds like such a nice guy. And I remember how I loved playing football. I would have died if my season was dashed because adults went off to do something stupid. I think of Laurel, whose whole little world was rocked when her mother gave her up to me. I am glad to have her. So far, she's good as gold, but she's suffered because I was drunk and stupid with a stranger one weekend. Or her mother had a life situation that she chose over her own daughter. I do need to show up after all.

I guess I am quiet for a little too long because the principal does all the talking.

"I understand if you aren't available," he says. "It was a long shot."

"No, no," I say. "I didn't mean to not respond. You just kind of threw me. May I ask why you thought of me?"

"Dawn Moring," he says. "I guess you made quite an impression on her."

"Who?" I ask.

My mind is blank. All I can think of is Laurel's mother, and her name is Lauren. Then it comes to me.

"Oh," I say. "The new teacher."

"Yes," he says. "She says, you know, we have an All-American here in town. I guess she knows something of sports. But I really couldn't argue with her. It's a good idea if you are available."

"Let me talk to my family," I say. "I'll work out some logistics. I already see how I can make it work."

"You can?" he says with such joy. "Mr. Ferguson, I can't tell you. Well, thank you."

“No thanks needed,” I say. “You have my number, and we can touch base tomorrow.”

“Speaking of touching base,” he says. “Baseball is not that far away.”

“Okay, one thing at a time,” I say.

He laughs.

“Have a good evening,” he says.

I walk into the house like a zombie. I don’t even feel like I am in reality. Also, there is a stroller all put together in the kitchen. My father did the honors. I would have liked to, but I love that he did it.

“Looks good,” I say, stunned.

My father doesn’t say two words to me. He just gathers up the packaging and takes it to the garage, to the trash.

“What’s the matter, dear?” my mother asks.

“Do you have that teacher’s phone number by chance?” I ask. “Did we get it?”

“I don’t think so, dear,” she says.

“The school just called,” I say, my voice breaking.

I am suddenly and strangely emotional.

I say, “They want me to coach.”

Then I remember, I know where she lives. I sent flowers to her house when she opened up an account.

“Excuse me,” I say.

“Where are you going?” my mother asks.

“Is the baby tucked in?” I ask.

“Yes,” she says. “She’s asleep.”

“I have to go out one more time,” I say. “I’ll be right back.”

I pass my father as he is coming into the house. I know to him it looks like I am probably heading out to The Brick. But I

am not. From our house to the town of Roseland proper is all of a five-minute drive. I pull up in front of Dawn Moring's house. The lights are on. I charge to the front door from the car, prepared to tear into her.

She opens the door. She looks so beautiful that it knocks me off my game.

"Hi," she says. "Won't you come in?"

"No," I say. "Say, listen, you suggested to your principal that I be the coach."

"Are you going to take it?" she asks so sweetly.

This woman has no clue that I am so pissed. She has put me on the spot in a way that I just want to be.

"Well, with the baby and all," I say, "it's a lot of responsibility. My mother takes care of her fine, but my mom isn't as young as she used to be. What I am saying is, I just leave a team without a coach, and now I feel like I am on the hook."

"Oh," she says, surprised.

"Yeah, oh," I say, my voice shaking. "I know my mother chatted you up at the store and then asked to eat with you at the café, but that's not me."

While I am running my mouth, hurting this woman's feelings, I realize I am a coward, and I like life better when there was no chance of meaningful interaction.

"I see," she says. "Thank you for setting me straight."

"So, in the future," I say, "if you have any other good ideas that involve me, don't act on them."

"Got it," she says. "Wait right here."

She closes the door and appears again. She has a vase full of the roses I sent her. She hands them to me.

"Here," she says. "Good night."

And she closes the door.

DAWN

Roseland High School still issues memoranda to teachers in actual inboxes. We do get the occasional email, but most of our communication is on paper. Like the quaintness of my Mid-Century home, I can't get over it. The polished oak grid with a cubby assigned to me is warming. Generations of teachers shared the same inbox as me, and I don't think I would have it any other way.

This morning, I get a memo, as did all the other staff, that Kyle Ferguson starts today. He will be acting in the "capacity of a substitute teacher and sports coach," and we are to make him feel welcome. After the way he left things a couple of weeks prior, biting my head off for putting his hat in this ring, I think it is best if I steer clear.

But I can't. Not because I can't resist him, but because the school is small and uncomplicated. It's sort of like this town. I just keep running into him, whether I am looking for him or not. Literally. I have no idea at first it is him. I am caught up in a swarm of students that whirl me into this nice-smelling man dressed like he is ready to play golf. I am surprised because I didn't recognize him. He grew his beard back, sort of. And I kind of expected him to dress like he did at the bank, in a dress shirt and dress slacks. Instead, he's in a polo shirt and khakis.

"Hello?" he snarks, as if to ask if I have a problem.

"Hi," I say politely. "Congratulations on the job."

It's an awkward reuniting, even though I should be polite no matter what. If we are going to work in the same building, I

need to move past it. But I keep stepping in it.

I add, "I thought you would start sooner."

A sharp current flares between us, not the mild alluring one I've experienced with him before. This one is uncomfortable, and I know I have annoyed him. He has the ability to communicate in vibe, and as a teacher, I have learned to pick up on cues. He's kind of a touchy guy. I don't know why my small talk has set him off, but it has.

"I wrapped up my other job," he answers. "Had to give them something of a notice."

"Makes sense," I say.

He looks at his watch. His face tenses. I don't have any reason to be there, but I can't seem to be on my way.

"So, I see you're growing your beard again," I say.

"What?" he asks, preoccupied.

"I am so sorry," I say. "I am interrupting you. Are you the hall monitor?"

"Yes," he responds, still eyeing his phone.

"It's just that Dr. Davidson asks that we not scroll on our phones when we are supposed to be keeping an eye on the kids," I say.

I don't know why I tell him this because he knows. He had driven out to my house to specifically tell me to mind my own business, and here I am doing what I do. It works great with kids. They need someone to intervene and correct. Kyle is a grown man who did just fine, more or less, before I came along. He looks at me with the gaze of a predatory bird. He's focused now.

"Let's see, my start date," he says, holding up a finger like he's counting. "My clothes, my facial hair, and now my overall conduct. Anything else? Am I slouching? Should I stand up straight?"

He does lift his posture in an exaggerated stance, throwing his shoulders back and sucking in his belly. I didn't think he

looked bad before, but he looks better.

“Have you lost weight?” I ask, still shoving my foot in my mouth.

He glares.

“Jeezus,” he scolds.

“We have to watch our language around the kids,” I say in a muted tone.

“You just can’t help yourself, can you?” he says, shaking his head.

I might be totally imagining things, but I’d swear he was smirking somewhere in all of his criticism of me.

He says, “If you must know, I am waiting to hear about Laurel.”

“The baby?” I cock my head. “Is she okay? You’re still babysitting her?”

“Fine,” he says bluntly.

He doesn’t answer or explain, but dealing with families and acquiring the skill of reading between the lines, I get that the situation is not as he and his mother described. I sort of knew that from the start. My brain conjures all sorts of scenarios. Maybe the mother has full custody and for now, can’t take care of the child.

Kyle just laughs like he can’t believe me. I am so self-conscious. Esmé filled me in on bits and pieces about him. That he comes from an affluent founding family. That he had a lot of potential, but he kind of didn’t live up to it, and that he has a bit of a reputation for being a surly partier. I guess that’s why the three-day beard concerns me. I wonder if that’s due to lifestyle instead of fashion sense. He looks healthy enough. And after I’ve spent the last seconds of my life fixated on him, I wonder why?

“And yes, we are still babysitting her,” he says sarcastically. “She wants to get her own place, but we feel she’s too young still.”

I laugh. I am glad he has a sense of humor because he made me remember mine.

“Okay, that was funny,” I say. “I’ll back off on the twenty questions.”

He shoots me a deep, smoldering gaze that has no hint of anger or sarcasm in it.

“I think we surpassed the twenty mark long ago,” he says sensually.

I don’t know how this man manages to put me through a whole range of feelings and emotions, but he does. The expression on his face wakes me. I hope I am not obvious that despite all his apparent character flaws, both that I’ve spotted and those that have been pointed out to me, I find him attractive. Heaven help me. And as if an answer to a prayer, the lunch bell rings. I am literally saved by the bell.

“That’s lunch, in case you didn’t know,” I say.

The school is so small that it has one lunch period. Unlike back in San Jose, where they started serving lunches at 10 a.m. And the lunches here are like something off the Roseland Café menu. They’re amazing.

Kyle laughs.

“Thank you,” he says. “I may skip it. I am trying to leave out of here early.”

He goes back to checking his phone.

“Oh,” I say wanly. “I guess there’s no point in asking you to join me.”

He looks up like he only half-heard me.

“For lunch?” I ask and then try to make light. “But never mind. I’ve pestered you enough.”

“No, I can have lunch,” he says reluctantly. “I just have to get out of here right at the close of business.”

He walks with me, but his mind is clearly elsewhere.

“You should arrange that stuff with Dr. Davidson,” I say.

Kyle cuts his eyes like I am ridiculous.

“I did,” he says emphatically. “I’m just helping out with the scheduling. I guess no one told you that, so I am now. I’m more available than others, so I have hall duty a bit more often. I’ll handle it.”

“I’ll stay in my lane,” I promise, admitting that I do, in fact, have a tendency to micromanage.

“Thank you,” he says softly as we enter the lunch line. “I would appreciate that.”

We eye the lunch selection.

“I would have figured you for someone who brought her lunch,” he says to me and then asks the lunch person, “May I have the Greek salad, please and thank you?”

The lady studies Kyle with the same awe someone might give a celebrity. It is the buzz of the school that a chief officer from Roseland Bank gave up his position, as far as we know, to come work at the school.

“I’ll have the same,” I say. “Dressing on the side.”

“I’ll have a side of air for salad dressing,” Kyle playfully mocks me.

“Bread?” asks the lunch person of Kyle.

“Yes, please,” he says.

He turns to me.

“I always accept the bread when I eat out,” he says. “I love to go to Founders’ Park to feed the birds. I can’t wait to take Laurel with me.”

“It’s probably not good for them,” I say out of reflex.

“The park is bad for kids?” he asks with disbelief.

“No, the birds, bread,” I clarify.

I really wish I hadn’t said that only because I feel so obvious. He drops his head and eyes me like, really?

“That’s right,” he says. “Birds are going keto these days. I keep forgetting.”

“It actually sounds like kind of a fun thing to do,” I say.

“Thank you,” he says and then asks the next lunch person. “I’ll take unsweetened iced tea, please?”

“Same,” I say.

I note, “So you already knew the menu.”

“I went to school here,” he reminds me. “It’s exactly the same. Except they didn’t have teachers like you when I was a kid.”

He steals a wink. I am flustered as we get to the cash register.

“I got us both,” he says and buys my lunch.

“Thank you,” I say, still stunned.

I couldn’t have come off as too much of a hen if he is buying me lunch. We sit at the teachers’ table. I feel the eyes of all the classes on us, like we’re going to be the subject of gossip. We sit.

“I think we’re being watched,” I say covertly.

“By the feds?” he laughs.

“No worse,” I reply. “Kids.”

We pause as other faculty lean in to shake his hand and welcome him. Despite all the mixed things I’ve heard from Esmé, he seems to be one of Roseland’s favorite sons. I am really impressed when Dr. Davidson approaches the faculty table with the same lunchbox that his wife packs for him every day. Kyle rises to shake his hand. It’s a definite sign of respect. For all his apparent disregard for convention and kind of thumbing his nose at rules, he knows how to do the right thing when he has to.

“Sir,” he says.

“Welcome,” Dr. Davidson says. “How did your first class go?”

I knew he was hired as a substitute, but I forgot he might have actually had classes today.

“Fine,” he says. “Class plan worked like a charm.”

Kyle turns to me and explains, “Dr. Davidson drew up my class plans for the year.”

“Wow,” I say, stunned. “I thought this was going to be temp.”

“In case Kyle wants to help us with the other sports seasons,” Dr. Davidson smiles.

“But you’re not a real teacher,” I say, thinking out loud.

“I am,” says Dr. Davidson. “He technically is substituting. Indefinitely. We’re working on ways to get him certified.”

“I am not a caveman,” Kyle says to me, and only when I’m looking, he wiggles his brow suggestively.

Then he has the audacity to act like it didn’t happen. He smirks. Now I feel like we’re the high schoolers. Dr. Davidson’s lunch is short-lived. He looks at his phone and gathers up his thoughtfully made lunch in a hurry.

“Let me know if you need anything, Kyle,” he says as an afterthought.

And he’s gone. Kyle also looks at his watch. Shakes his head.

“Is the baby okay?” I ask.

He arches his brow like I’m overstepping again.

“Hey, I went through the lunch line with you,” I joke. “I figure it was okay to ask.”

“She’s fine,” he answers. “It’s just she has this annoying habit of needing constant supervision.”

My eyes go wide.

“I am kidding,” he says. “I have a thing after work I want to go to. I don’t want to just assume my mother is going to care for her. She is caring for her during the day.”

“You’re going out during the week?” I ask. “On a school night?”

“Yep, that’s the plan,” he says tightly.

I have already stuck my nose in where it doesn’t belong, and he has said as much. My judgment has to be obvious. I try to reel it in, but it might be too late. He takes one more bite of his salad, which he ate at lightspeed, and I didn’t even notice. He guzzles his tea. I get the distinct feeling it’s not that he’s in a hurry to be somewhere but maybe to be away from me. I think that whatever it is with this man that plucks my nerves so, I have become an awkward spazz when he is near. I have said and done all the wrong things. I take a deep breath and start again.

“Thanks for lunch,” I say sincerely.

I am sad he is leaving.

“You’re welcome,” he says. “I have a P.E. class next. Then hall duty after that. See ya.”

Kyle leaving the table and walking away leaves a big gap. I haven’t been at the school much longer than he has, and so I don’t really know my colleagues. They didn’t reach out to me like they did him. I chalk that up to a lot of things and don’t take it personally. I just feel kind of alone right now. I play it cool and clear my place.

I return my tray, and the bell rings. I have a planning hour the next period, so I don’t have a class to get to. I take my time because the lunchroom is next to the locker rooms. Soon enough, Kyle is leading students through the hall to the gymnasium. I stop him.

“Mr. Ferguson,” I say.

The kids flow into the gym, past us. Every pair of eyes are on us as we interact.

“Yes, Miss Moring,” he says patiently, though that patience sounds thin.

“I wanted to give you my number,” I say.

The kids stopped cold. Kyle turns to them.

“Keep it moving,” he says in a firm voice.

I would never share this with him, but it’s kind of sexy when he’s in charge. I would do what he said, I think.

“If you ever get stuck for a babysitter,” I say.

“You mean when I am out on a school night?” he arches his brow.

He did pick up on my judgment.

“Or other times,” I say. “I like children, obviously.”

I ready my phone to send to him.

“What’s your number?” I ask.

“That’s what this is really all about,” he teases.

I shake my head and mouth that’s not appropriate. Not in front of the kids.

He mimics me, saying silently, then don’t offer your number in front of them next time.

“I have your number, thanks,” he says, declining to give me his. “Same way I got your address to send you roses. The ones you gave back to me.”

“Okay,” I say, acting like I am shrugging this moment off. “Good luck in class.”

KYLE

I can't believe it has become a thing—a point of contention—in my house that I am going to parenting classes. My father is as disappointed as I am that the paternity test takes as long as it does.

“I can't make the science move faster, Dad,” I say to him. “Or the government for that matter. I'm just following the legal process.”

He thinks that's my fault.

On top of that, it certainly doesn't help our relationship that I gave notice at the bank for what is essentially a temporary job. My dad doesn't think being a coach is a noble calling.

“From bank officer to substitute teacher?” he shouts.

With there being so many changes in my life, and I don't have my teaching certification anyway, Dr. Davidson suggested a long-term substitute position on top of the coaching. I try to have a conversation with my father about all of that, and he just puts his hand up and walks away.

Then I am like, I really don't have to explain this to you. Whether it is the way I would have planned it, my prayers are answered. I am moving on into adulthood. I have my own job now instead of the one my father gave me, I'm looking for a rental which also irks him. Now I am taking classes to learn how to best take care of Laurel, whether she is my biological daughter or not.

“We never took classes on how to be a parent,” he scoffs. “Ridiculous.”

Maybe you should have, I think but don't dare say out loud.

“It's a good thing, John,” my mother defends.

As usual. She may be a tad interfering, but if she has to take sides, she usually takes mine.

“Well, I have to go in twenty minutes,” I say. “So I won't be back till like 8:30.”

“That's your affair,” my dad says. “No pun intended. But your mother and I are not available to babysit. We've watched her all day long.”

“Dad, you were on the golf course at the crack of dawn,” I snap back, trying to keep my voice pleasant.

I don't want to have tension of any kind around the baby.

“Then you hung out at the club,” I remind him.

“What?” he wrenches his face. “Are you a spy?”

“No, it's your routine every day,” I say. “But fine. You're not available to watch her? I should not just dump her on you anyway. You are right.”

I gather her up and grab my keys.

“Where are you going?” my mother begs like she is never going to see the baby or me again.

“I am not going to miss that class even if I have to take her with me,” I say.

“But it's her bedtime,” she says urgently.

My mother cuts her eyes with deadly shade at my father, who rolls his eyes.

“Fine,” my dad huffs. “Leave her here so she can go to bed on time.”

“If you're sure?” I say. “Because really, I need to learn to make this work one way or the other.”

I knew the second I learned I might be a father, this back-and-forth was going to happen. My dad is power-tripping badly. Moving forward, instead of facing my mother's silent wrath, he stages it so that they are unavailable for each class. This means the following week that I attend class, I do end up taking Laurel with me, and it's a disaster. Dr. Safran takes me aside as I walk out of the class during break, to leave for the evening.

"I'm sorry we were a disruption," I say.

"This is all fine," he says. "It's part of being the parent of a very young child. You have to establish a network. Find a person you can trust outside of the family if the family isn't on board."

For the class after that, my father, who wouldn't take my mother anywhere even though she's long deserved it, up and takes her to Bellevue for an overnight the night of my class. I start my babysitter search as he lays his surprise on her. I am at the school in the morning, at seven, monitoring the gym for kids who want to train before class starts. I have been lifting with them, hitting the treadmill in addition to conducting practice after school. I run laps and do drills alongside the guys. I don't have time to meet a new person that I can trust with this precious little person.

But I ask everyone. I swallow my pride and suss out my ex-fiancée, Ellie Grey. She was nice about me reaching out, but she's got a little one and is pregnant with baby No. 2. I even thought of David Dye. Or any of his employees. Then, of course, I asked Esmé at the café. I stopped in after practice, in my sweaty glory for an iced tea. She sets it down.

"I never thought I would see the day when I served Kyle Ferguson tea that didn't even have so much as sugar in it," she marvels.

"Yeah, I know," I grumble.

I am aware of my reputation for being something of a barfly at the local watering hole, The Brick. I can't remember the last time I stepped foot in the place when I used to awake and count the hours until I could take my place on my

barstool. The bartender, Mike, would mix my drink the moment I walked in. This factors in the other reason why it's so silly my dad is upset I don't work at the bank.

"A Ferguson has been at Roseland Bank for a hundred years," he says.

But I was only at the bank for two-hour days before I stepped into the unrealistic world of our local bar scene. Now that I have straightened up my ways, I get daily reminders of what I was like. People dusting off their funny bones to make jokes at my expense.

"What I am here for," I say, swallowing my pride and biting my tongue as Esmé tries out her A material, "is I need a babysitter for Laurel."

"You're still watching that little girl?" she asks.

She knows I am. She's fishing for the whole story. I know that Esmé would be awesome with the baby, but the fact that she is the walking Roseland search engine gets under my skin.

I am not stupid; I know that everyone is speculating Laurel is my daughter. I am sure she is, but I need that test confirmation before I can own that fact. The state won't recognize just any test. Their rules, not mine. For now, all I want is caretaker-Esmé, not a gossip columnist.

"I wish I could," she says. "But Ellie's dad and I have plans."

"What is with everyone over fifty having a better social life than me?" I blurt out.

"Excuse me?" she says, taken aback.

"I apologize," I laugh. "That didn't come out right."

"No, it did not," she scolds.

"I am just saying that first my mother and father, and now you and Mr. Pruitt," I say. "I'll find someone."

"What? Have you got a date?" she jokes.

She is more than funny; she's trying to pry me for information.

“Yeah, that’s it,” I say sarcastically. “You know me so well. I have a hot date.”

“Have you asked Dawn?” she suggests.

I close my eyes, pressing my eyelids tight. The very thought of my sumptuous colleague is sweet torture. It’s hard enough to work with the woman, with her always thoughtfully making small conversation or asking me to join her for lunch. Her in her smart little teacher outfits, smelling like the softest scented flower on the planet. To have to include Dawn Moring into more aspects of my life and treat her with chaste respect would be too much to ask. I am not of good enough character to pull that off.

Around her, my insides scream to revert back to my teenage self. I want to seduce her sweet schoolmarm, but I can’t think and act like that anymore. I have to be a respectable citizen for Laurel’s sake. They say girls marry their dads. I want to be the kind of man I would want her to marry.

“You look like that’s a bad idea,” Esmé says.

“It’s fine,” I say reluctantly.

Now she’s going to blab it to Dawn that I was hesitant about asking her.

“I just know that with teaching,” I fib, “and having to grade papers and all that she has to do, she doesn’t want to come home and babysit a little baby on Wednesday nights.”

“Every Wednesday night?” Esmé blurts out.

I know she thinks I am doing something bachelorly. I don’t want to tell her that I have parenting classes. Then that would be as good as saying I am Laurel’s dad. Laurel can’t understand it now, but she doesn’t need to have that kind of scandal associated with her. It’s not her fault how she was conceived.

“I have her number if you want it,” Esmé says.

“I have it, thanks,” I say abruptly.

“You do?” she asks, all interested.

“Yes, Esmé, I do,” I say.

I slurp down my iced tea and set it in the bus cart. I hand Esmé a twenty. I do forget that I am not getting paid at the bank anymore, that I draw a substitute teacher’s salary. I have already given her the bill and slink out the door. I text Dawn.

“Hi there,” I write. “It’s Kyle Ferguson.”

“Yes, I know,” she replies. “I have you in my contacts. You don’t have to tell me every time you text me.”

If I didn’t feel enough of a dork before, I do now.

“Thank you,” I write. “I have a huge favor to ask of you.”

She calls in the middle of our texting. I wanted to avoid a live conversation, but I answer.

“You want me to babysit,” she says cheerfully.

“Did Esmé just tell you?” I ask, feeling very cornered.

“No,” she laughs.

“I usually go out on Wednesday nights,” I say. “And my mom and dad will be out of town this week; otherwise, they would do it. So, I need someone for the baby.”

“Yeah, well,” she says hesitantly.

She doesn’t say yes right away, so I am wondering if that means it’s going to be a no.

“Do you have a minute?” she asks. “Maybe you can stop by.”

“Let me check in with my mom,” I say. “She has the baby.”

I am ecstatic and grateful that my mom is there for me and for the baby, but it is humbling to have to admit that I need my mother’s permission to stop by. But I do.

By the time it takes for me to place the call, I am already at Dawn’s house. It is as sweet and picture-perfect as she is. I park in front and enter the yard through the gate on the sidewalk. She appears at the door. A random daydream crosses my mind that this might be what it would look like if I were

coming home to her. It's both a wonderful and terrifying thought that stops me in my tracks.

"You okay?" she asks, stepping fully outside into the golden light of the aging day.

"Yeah," I lie. "Just remembering something."

"I have the coffee on," she says. "Decaf."

Before I can catch myself, I make a face. I can't hide it because I make it as I pass her at the door on my way into the house. We are the closest physically we have ever been. Our eyes connect. My grimace at decaf coffee smooths out to the same faint smile that she is wearing.

"Good evening, Mr. Ferguson," she flirts.

"People are going to talk that I am visiting you," I warn softly.

"Come in anyway," she says firmly. "I have peach pie."

Any response to that is going to sound lascivious, so I keep it short and simple.

"Good," I say.

She closes the door behind her.

"So," she says, bustling by me to the kitchen. "You need me to babysit Laurel."

I draw out a chair at the dining room table, which is dressed in a nice linen cloth. Her house, like her, is pristine and well-appointed. She's already set our places with a cup and saucer and dessert plates.

"I do," I muse, "And you want to have a discussion about it."

She blinks at me like I've just spoken in a foreign tongue. I chuckle softly.

"Just curious, are you the meeting type?" I ask. "You ever seen that meme? 'This meeting could have been an email'?"

"I just thought you would like to know who is going to take care of your daughter," she says, pouring my coffee.

I touch her hand.

“She’s not my daughter,” I say adamantly.

She nods like she misspoke.

“I mean the baby you’re taking care of,” she amends and then adds, “Long term.”

“With school taking up my day in the way my other job didn’t,” I say. “I have to do stuff at night.”

“Pie?” she asks.

I haven’t had dinner, which I know my mother has made, and I can’t really, per doctor’s orders, but I indulge. She sets the pie on the table.

“Yeah, I will have a really small slice,” I say. “I am not supposed to have sugar.”

And just like that, she takes the pie away.

“I’ll bring it to the teacher’s lounge tomorrow,” she says. “I don’t eat sugar either, but someone sent it to me as a welcome.”

“You took it away,” I say with disbelief.

“Yeah,” she shrugs. “You’re not supposed to have it.”

“You always follow the rules?” I ask.

“Yes,” she says. “You should-”

“I should what?” I cock my head, daring her. “I should try it? That’s exactly what I am doing. And why I am here.”

Ordinarily, I would go off on her for insulting me, even though it’s probably deserved. But I swallow my ego for the sake of the baby.

“Are you available to babysit Wednesday?” I ask.

“Yes,” she says. “Of course, I am. I am happy to come to your place, or you can bring her here.”

“Well, it will be on my way, coming and going, if I bring her here,” I say. “Usually, my mom watches her on

Wednesdays, but she and my father are having a mini honeymoon in Bellevue that night.”

“How sweet,” she says. “That’s adorable.”

Dawn pushes my buttons but is really beautiful and wholesome. If she had wandered into my web at The Brick, I would have snagged her by now. Walking on the straight and narrow makes that a little more difficult.

“So, what are you doing?” she asks coyly.

“And why do you ask?” I say in a soft but decidedly dark tone. “You want to know what I am doing or maybe, who?”

She stutters. I laugh it off.

“It’s nothing dicey or interesting,” I say. “Promise.”

“In that case,” she says, “come a little early, and I’ll have dinner for both of you.”

“That’s very kind,” I say, unable to not stare at her. “You’re very kind.”

DAWN

I ordered a portable sleeper for the baby, along with some sheets and a blanket. It wasn't that expensive, and David Dye from the General Store delivered everything himself. He is a cutie, and I think he kind of likes me, but I can't even think about him. As cantankerous as our relationship sometimes is, I can only think of Kyle. I want him. I have been working on our dinner since I knew he and the baby were coming over. It's just spaghetti and meatballs, but I am so ready all I have to do is boil noodles after work.

He has a thing at eight, he says, but he won't tell me what it is. I can babysit the child, who he insists is not his, but he won't tell me what he's doing that he needs a babysitter. He will let me feed him, so he's not going to a dinner date. In that case, I am going to get dolled up. I put on a dress and do my hair and makeup. Not too over the top, but since we are having dinner, I go for it.

I don't think he's ever seen me in lipstick. I am wearing a slip dress that shows no cleavage or too much thigh, but it's cute. I spent money to have it tailored, so it's fitted almost like a second skin. Even though it's after Labor Day and I am not supposed to wear white, I don't care. It's my house. I am wearing spiked heels as well.

They are here. I can hear the wheels of his car. I open the door. He is wearing his usual polo shirt and khakis, but he shaved, so he looks good. The baby is in her pajamas, and she is so cute. He put a little bow headband on her, which I will casually remove. I think they're dangerous. She is asleep in

the car seat, which detaches and becomes a carrier. He walks past me, toting her. He gently sits her on the coffee table. I start to close the door, but he stops me.

“There’s more,” he says.

“She is only going to be here a couple of hours,” I smile.

But he goes back to the car and reaches into the passenger seat. He pulls out a bouquet. I am so touched.

“You didn’t have to do that,” I say.

“It was either this or pay you,” he jokes.

I hadn’t thought about money. I giggle.

“Smells great in here,” he says. “And you look amazing. Pearls for babysitting. That’s showing initiative.”

“I wanted to dress up a little,” I say. “If I didn’t wear this dress soon, I was going to donate it to Goodwill.”

“You never wore it before?” he asks.

“Nope,” I say. “I bought it about a year ago. I figure other people do so, why not me?”

“That’s the spirit,” he says with a wink.

I laugh.

“And yeah, so I never wore it,” I say.

“We’re honored to be at the premiere,” he says, his eyes smoldering.

I am caught off guard by his flattery, and all I can do is smile. I gush like a teenager.

“Well, I guess we can eat,” I say, my face red hot from a blush.

“Are you?” he asks. “Was that too much?”

“No,” I shake my head.

He tips my chin with his finger.

“Look at me,” he says.

I can’t stop grinning.

“You are blushing,” he says. “I had you all wrong.”

“How is that?” I say, recovering. “Sit.”

I put on an apron and place the food on trivets. There is a window that looks over the dining room space so that we can serve from either side. He hears me and gets up to help. He stops and stares.

“What?” I ask, looking down.

“Cute apron,” he says.

“Thanks,” I smile. “Would you like to open the wine? I figure one glass would be okay even though we have school tomorrow.”

“Oh no,” he says as though the wine is kryptonite. “I don’t drink.”

“Oh,” I say and am suddenly confused.

That is not what I heard about him. In fact, almost every story I heard involved his drinking. Now I feel so awful for listening to the gossip. He is super intuitive because he knows what the problem is.

“It’s okay,” he says.

I am not going to even bother to deny it. All I can do is look guilty. Just like the blush, I can feel my shame on my face. I feel like I just got caught gossiping.

“I didn’t have any responsibilities not too long ago,” he says. “I changed all that.”

“Well, that’s awesome,” I say. “I also have iced tea.”

“Honestly,” he says. “I feel like such a lightweight. That’ll keep me up all night.”

Now his face colors like he said something he shouldn’t. I am not quite following him.

“Um, water is fine,” he says.

On the dining room side of the serving window, I start to dish up dinner but then I realize I forgot to grab the plates. He

very stealthily is behind me with the plates so when I turn around, we are face to face in close quarters.

“Oh,” I gasp.

His vibe is amazing. So masculine and grounded. All the things I have heard about him don't do any justice to him at all. Beneath all the bad boy reputation, this is a solid man. A very attractive man. In the couple of weeks that I've known him, he's transformed too. He's leaner and looks a lot more like the picture in the trophy case.

“Excuse me,” he says genuinely and steps back.

I like having him near, but I'm glad he stepped back because I don't think I could handle the energy that flows between us. I know it can't be one-sided. I've always kind of felt it, but we haven't had a chance to simmer down long enough to really experience it.

“You've worked so hard on everything,” he says. “Why don't you sit and let me get our plates?”

“Thank you,” I rasp.

“The baby is out like a little lightbulb,” I say and laugh. “I am kind of dumb.”

“What?” he asks, setting my food down, then his before sitting next to me.

“Well,” I admit, “I kind of went shopping. But she's little and simple. However, I made sure I was stocked up. I almost bought her a highchair.”

“Oh,” he touches my hand. “Please do not do that. Don't go to that kind of trouble.”

I grimace to signal I already kind of had.

“Did you buy something?” he asks.

“I bought a little baby bed,” I say, laughing at myself. “I got ahead of myself, I admit. I figured maybe I'll babysit her more often.”

“I can wake her,” he jokes.

I laugh again.

“You keep doing that,” I say softly.

“What?” he asks sensually.

“Making me laugh,” I admit.

“I am glad,” he says sympathetically. “But you really didn’t have to go to all that trouble and expense. Let me reimburse you for whatever you bought.”

“No,” I say. “I had fun.”

“Half,” he insists. “If you bought a bed.”

“It’s kind of like a playpen thingy she can sleep in,” I say. “But then I look at the car seat and realize she doesn’t need all that.”

He touches my hand again.

“It was really sweet,” he says sincerely. “And this dinner is off the hook. Have I told you how nice it is to have dinner in a place that is not the café or the Brick or my dinner table?”

I smile from ear to ear, very pleased with myself. We eat somewhat quickly. I stand to clear the plates, thinking I will get the dessert, but Kyle follows me into the kitchen. I turn around and he’s right there.

“We keep doing that,” he says softly.

I am practically in his arms. I just go for it. I extend just the slightest bit and brush my lips to his. He takes my face in his hands and kisses me more fully. We break simultaneously and touch foreheads. It’s like he’s asking himself whether he should.

“Why not?” I whisper.

And kiss him again. He is cautious at first so I step it up. I plunge my tongue into his mouth and taste every bit of him. I dance him back until his buttocks are resting against the counter. I lean against him, pressing my breast against his solid chest. He’s like colliding with a mountain.

“Goodness,” I murmur.

“What?” he whispers.

“You feel good,” I say.

“So do you,” he replies.

Finally, he explores. His hand cups my breast. He nuzzles the soft underside of my jaw, and I growl. I am too loud at first, so he touches my lips with his fingers to shush me. The baby is in the next room over. She is so sound asleep.

“Wait one sec,” I say.

I grab my step stool and shutter the window that looks out over the dining room and into the living room. We have privacy. But while I am sort of on the counter, Kyle grips my hips. My rump is facing him, and his hands are splayed partially on my cheeks. He draws me back against his chest. It’s an incredibly erotic position that changes things. So, so erotic. I am disabled with arousal. I turn around so I am sitting on the counter. My knees are parted, and he wedges in between. I want him. He is kissing me more passionately. I take his hand and place it on the inside of my thigh. He steps back, regarding me with wide eyes.

“It’s okay,” I assure him.

He steps forward and unzips my dress. It falls away to reveal a very expensive push-up bra. My breasts are heaving. He kisses them both and then tilts me on my hips with knees slightly hiked in the air. He lifts his mouth from my cleavage to the inside of my thigh. I balance on the palm of my hands as he parts my knees. He lifts his soulful, hazy eyes to me once before I clutch his head. He brushes his lips along my thigh towards my panties. I bare myself for him and breathe deeply as his tongue makes contact with me there.

A cry rushes through my chest, out my throat, but I swallow it. We are fooling around in total silence so as not to wake Laurel, but inside I am screaming. Kyle is driving me wild. He penetrates me with his tongue, and I would climax on his mouth if it were not for the fact that he backs off just as I am almost there. It is the worst and sweetest tease I have ever known. I am lit with passion, but so far it has all been for me.

Or so I think.

He scoops the small of my back forward so that we are entwined, my knees around him. In a sly maneuver, he impales me with his amazingly endowed phallus. He is inside of me, and in some kind of weird yoga pose, we are having sex standing up. Except for the occasional breath that gushes from each of us, we are absolutely quiet. It is so naughty and a little inventive that it does not take long until we are burying our faces in each other's necks, as a powerful orgasm possesses me. I am catapulted into another dimension. Like I am rocketed out of reality into a realm of total bliss.

Kyle staggers, and eventually I have the presence of mind to extend one foot and then the other until I am bearing my own weight. He is helpless, lost to a climax of his own. We disconnect and tussle with our clothes until we sort of look like the whole thing never happened. We steal glances at one another, checking in.

We both wear the same sort of guilty expression, as though we just did out loud what had been crossing our minds about the other since we first met.

“Man alive,” he murmurs, shaking his head. “Here I was thinking, well never mind.”

He laughs darkly. Little Laurel stirs in the next room over. I guess even at a whisper, our talking wakes her. I can see the panic in his face. He glances at his watch, and his face takes on a look of horror.

“Aw, shit,” he says in a panic, then covers his mouth, obviously uncomfortable cursing within earshot of the baby.

“I missed it,” he says as we both go to the living room to attend to the baby. “I totally missed it.”

“Missed what?” I ask, then facepalm. “Oh, my goodness. I am so sorry.”

“It's not your fault,” he says, picking up the now crying baby.

“Okay,” I say in my calmest voice. “We need to stay quiet and collected, or we will upset her more.”

“My mom usually does all this,” he says.

“So, we can too,” I reply. “Come.”

I bring them to the small area of my office that I set up for her. I have diapers, wipes.

“She probably needs changing,” I say.

He hands me the baby, but I direct him so that he changes Laurel.

“If you practice, you will feel more confident,” I say.

I would swear he had the panic of a father. From what I gather, the baby just came to them recently, so the only thing I can think of is that he just found out he is a father. I don’t understand the pretense, but I don’t push. He’s upset. But now that the baby is changed, she’s quiet and content.

“Well, my thing is over,” he says. “I guess we’ll just pack up and go.”

We head out of my office. He starts to cut through the kitchen, then takes a sharp turn down the hall.

“Can’t go in there,” he murmurs.

“She’s awake,” I say. “Why don’t you stay and have dessert? Of course, we already had some of that.”

It’s as though he doesn’t hear me. He slips the baby into the car seat carrier.

“Watch her for a sec?” he asks, taking stuff out to the car.

“Hello?” I ask, shocked by his abruptness. “I am right here. What is happening?”

He finally faces me.

“I have to keep my priorities straight,” he says.

“Yeah, we all do,” I respond, feeling like he is about to hurt my feelings.

“This can’t happen again,” he whispers.

There is a tenderness in his eyes that almost makes me let him off the hook.

But I don't.

"You're something else," I murmur.

"I'm sure Esme told you all that," he says, taking a dig.

The baby, bright-eyed in her little carrier, flashes a smile at him, and he returns it. It's clear he adores her.

"She's going to be awake all night now," he sighs.

"That makes two of us," I respond as I see them to the door.

KYLE

My classes don't start until ten o'clock, and by that time, my mother and father are home from Bellevue. I can't afford to be angry, pressured, or upset. I'm starting to see things as blessings in disguise, something I've never done before. Even though my dad's night out with my mother was a dig at me, it actually provided me with time to spend with Laurel. She is incredibly precious to me. Soon, I'll know for sure that I am her father, but it already feels like it. Normally, I waste time glued to my phone, scrolling aimlessly on the internet. When I'm with her, all I want to do is focus on her.

Except for last night. As a former football player and now a sports coach, I don't take the phrase 'dropped the ball' lightly. I completely forgot about class. I can't blame Dawn because that would be too easy. Last night, I fell back into old habits. I shirked my responsibility to chase a skirt. The experience was heavenly, so different from others I've had. Dawn surprised me. I thought I would have to draw her out of her shell, but she turned out to be a vixen. It's a shame I can't remember the moment fondly because I feel like a bad father for indulging.

Emailing Dr. Safran is the one thing I do pick up my phone for. Other than that, I feel like the luckiest person in the world to spend time with this little pixie. My parents arrive right on time. They enter the house, and I dutifully offer to help.

"Can I grab any other bags?" I ask.

My father remains distant. I want to scold him for bringing negativity around the baby, but that would only compound the

problem. My mother coos over Laurel as if she hasn't seen the baby in months.

“Did you get big overnight?” she asks her.

“Yes, Mom,” I laugh. “She became a giant and is currently reverting to baby form.”

My mom and I share a laugh. I think I'm going to head out to school on a good note when my father interrupts.

“Always the smartass,” he murmurs.

I bite my tongue. It just confirms what Dr. Safran says: I need to build a network and get out from under their roof. After a few minutes' drive to school, it hits me that I am likely to face another emotional maelstrom. I left things rough with Dawn, clumsily ending things with a ‘this can never happen again.’ I'll give it a little time and then talk to her. I'd be underestimating her if I didn't at least try to work things out. I can't have a relationship with her, or anyone else, at least not right now. I was weak and, though it wasn't her fault, she made it very easy to give into temptation.

When I arrive at school, I'm on hall monitor duty first thing, then I have a class, then it's back to monitoring after lunch. I find myself gravitating near Dawn's room. Pretending to check out the bulletin board, I overhear shouting. The high schoolers sound mature, so I can't tell if it's an adult or an adolescent raising their voice. However, I recognize Dawn's voice. She's in an argument with someone, and now this conversation has my full attention.

I park outside Dawn's classroom for reasons other than eavesdropping or unrequited love. These situations can escalate rapidly, so I need to be on standby. When the door opens, one of my football players, Kirby Campbell, storms out. I quickly follow him, hoping to prevent any reckless actions and to assist him if possible.

“Kirby,” I call out. “Wait up.”

I can hear Dawn behind me, but she maintains a respectful distance.

“What's the issue?” I ask him.

“I worked my tail off on that paper!” he exclaims.

“Language,” I correct him, feeling slightly hypocritical.

“And Miss California here purposely graded me down,” he complains, “because she thinks I can do better. She should read some of the nonsense the other kids wrote, and they got As.”

He vents his frustration at her, while she stands silently in the corner.

“Ease up,” I advise him. “Send me a copy of the paper.”

“It doesn’t matter,” he retorts. “If I don’t get a better grade on the paper right now, I can’t practice. It’s school policy.”

“I just think you’re capable of so much more,” she finally interjects, clearly using me as a barrier.

“I don’t want to do better now,” he counters in a hostile tone.

His anger towards her is palpable.

“You’re taking away the only thing that matters to me,” he asserts.

“No one is taking anything away,” I assure him.

“Bring back the other teacher,” Kirby demands. “At least her worst problem was that she was promiscuous.”

I cringe. He’s crudely referring to the teacher who eloped with a coach. The reference is awkward on multiple levels, not least because I slept with her replacement the previous night, the woman he’s berating now.

“You need to watch your language and your temper,” I warn him firmly. “Or you’ll be off the team permanently. Those are my rules. Send me the paper and come to practice.”

“Thank you,” he snaps triumphantly, glowering at Dawn.

Kirby storms off.

“What did you just do?” she exclaims.

“I’ve already been yelled at at home,” I respond. “Then by an irate student. I don’t need it from you too.”

“You just undermined my authority,” she retorts. “You just taught him that if he bullies people, he can get what he wants, and you’ll back him up.”

As Dawn continues her lecture, I pretend to listen. In reality, I’m just enjoying the sight of her, reminded of the passion we shared the previous night.

“You had no right to interfere,” she insists. “I’m his teacher.”

“Well, so am I,” I remind her with a grin.

“Not a real one,” she counters.

“Oh,” I respond, taken aback.

That comment has completely blindsided me.

“I get it,” I say. “I’m just a substitute. When I stand in a room delivering a lesson, I’m merely babysitting. But when you deliver a lesson, you’re teaching.”

“I apologize,” she offers.

“When I’m running drills with immature boys like the one we just encountered,” I continue, “instructing them and pushing their limits, that’s trivial.”

“Well, that’s what I was trying to do,” she retorts.

I level with her.

“But I succeed,” I whisper. “He gives me his all on the field.”

“I didn’t mean to belittle your job,” she tries to apologize. “It’s just that you shouldn’t have interfered.”

“No,” I respond. “That’s your department. You feel justified inserting your pretty little nose where it doesn’t belong because you’re so righteous.”

I’ve hurt her feelings, something I never intended. Who am I kidding? Even as a football player, nobody saw P.E. teachers as real teachers. Athletes considered them coaches, but P.E. and health were perceived as less significant classes. I need to find a way to apologize, but she pushes my buttons once more.

“You’re welcome for the job,” she retorts, returning to her class.

“You mean the one that isn’t real?” I ask.

Once again, I can’t hold my tongue. I’m sure I irritate her as much as she irks me. I do appreciate that she helped me get this job.

“I am going to go broke buying this woman flowers,” I murmur to myself.

By practice time at the end of the day, Kirby has sent his paper, and I review it. I don’t even need to read it thoroughly. Dawn was right. It was good, but someone with the ability to write a paper like that could have stretched a bit more. But knowing the kid, I doubt he wrote it. It sounds like a girlfriend’s handiwork. To complicate matters, I’m waiting on him, but I refuse to let him delay practice. If he shows up, he can’t participate. No tardiness allowed. Ever.

I usually work out with the guys, but I opt out today. I could really use it, though. I’ve heard from my real estate agent that a house in Dawn’s neighborhood is available, and it’s in my price range. The agent sends a link to a virtual tour, and I take a look. It’s charming. It has two bedrooms on the main floor, and a giant dorm room – it might be perfect.

“I’ll take it,” I respond.

“Don’t you want to see it in person?” she asks.

“To be honest, I need to move,” I reply, chuckling at my situation. “I’m a grown man still living with my parents. It’s been time to leave the nest for a while.”

“I understand,” she says. “In that case, send me your earnest money along with your application, and I’ll handle the rest.”

While my thoughts should be occupied by my daughter, Laurel, I find them gravitating towards Dawn. Now that I have a new place, I daydream about us furnishing the house together. She has such exquisite taste, and it would be wonderful to rely on her to make my house the ideal home for the baby. I also can’t help but reflect on how I ruined her day. I

told her she stuck her nose where it didn't belong. Some might interpret that as caring and considerate. As I glance up, I realize practice is almost over. I was barely present throughout.

“Apologies, guys,” I say. “I promise to be more engaged tomorrow.”

The weather is absolutely delightful. We are experiencing an Indian summer, so the air is soft and warm, making it not too hot for a workout. As the guys shower and head home, I text the real estate agent one more time.

“I think I will take a walkthrough,” I say.

“But you've already put a deposit down,” she replies.

“Oh, I don't plan to change my mind,” I write. “I just want to see it.”

“There's a lockbox on it,” she says, sending me the code.

I inform my mom I'll be home about twenty minutes late. The good news is that once I've settled, that will change. I'll be coming straight home to Laurel from school, no longer needing to navigate the emotional labyrinth of my parents to enjoy her presence. I feel like we've missed out on so much already. This move is going to be beneficial. As I'm leaving the school, I run into Dr. Davidson. He probably wants to discuss today's incident.

“Kyle, I see you are on your way out,” he says thoughtfully. “Let's make time tomorrow to talk about what happened today.”

“Yes, sir,” I reply.

I'm eager to see my new place—assuming all the formalities go through—but it also offers me a chance to drive through Dawn's neighborhood. She might even spot me, given the kismet or karma that seems to draw us together, in spite of ourselves.

I arrive at the house quickly—Roseland is so small I could probably run to work. If it weren't for needing to commute promptly because of Laurel, I might. I approach the lockbox

and manage to open it on the second attempt. The electricity is on, but it smells musty.

“How long has this place been vacant?” I ask.

“A while,” the agent replies.

They must have used a filter in the photos, as the house needs a touch of TLC. But the potential is undeniable.

“Ask if I can paint before moving in,” I say. “I know they should cover the cost, but I’ll handle it if they allow me to choose the colors.”

“Done,” says the agent. “You have the house. They’ve decided to go with you.”

I also plan to get a home inspection. I’m treating the house as if I’m already the homeowner, but I want to ensure it’s all safe for the baby. I wish I could ask Dawn, but I’ll involve my mother instead. She’ll enjoy decorating. I can’t wait to share the good news. I can’t believe how elated I feel.

I haven’t felt this good in ages. I find my mind wandering back to the morning Laurel arrived. I was struggling to untangle myself from the chains that kept me rooted in place, and she was the key. She’s the reason I’m here now. Driving leisurely through what is soon to be my neighborhood—which I know Dawn also calls home—I pass her house. She’s in the front yard, tending to it, watering plants, and just enjoying the outdoors.

Our eyes meet. It’s a moment straight out of a movie. It feels like I’m driving in slow motion, even though the connection lasts only a split second—or else I would’ve crashed. I pull over and park the car. She turns off the hose.

“What are you doing here?” she asks, on the defensive.

“Here specifically?” I respond, thinking she’s just about the prettiest woman I’ve ever seen. “I came to apologize. But as for the neighborhood, I just got a place here.”

“You’re going to be living near me?” she scoffs.

I can’t help but laugh.

“It’s Roseland,” I point out. “Everyone here lives near everyone else. I’m really sorry about today. You were right and I was wrong.”

“Wow,” she says, taken aback.

“He didn’t show up for practice,” I confess, as if I’m the one who should feel guilty about it.

“I hope nothing is wrong,” she says. “He’s a good kid, with a lot of potential, but I see him hanging out with some questionable types.”

“Well, I don’t think he wrote that paper,” I share with her.

“It’s consistent with his other work,” she replies. “Anyway, it’s getting chilly. And the world is shrinking by the second.”

She subtly inclines her head, indicating a nosy neighbor who is clearly eavesdropping on our conversation.

“Can we continue this conversation inside?” she suggests.

“Yeah,” I respond, though I probably should decline.

I have my daughter, Laurel, waiting at home.

“Just for a minute,” I add, even though I’m aware that won’t be the case once the soft scent of her perfume envelopes me as I follow her into the house.

DAWN

“So, Kirby didn’t show?” I ask, endeavoring to sound neutral.

Even though I strive for an unbiased tone, our heightened sensitivities can lead to misunderstandings. We take things the wrong way, or they awkwardly come out the wrong way. I’m so pleased to see him; I don’t want to drive him away.

Our reactive dynamic works wonders in intimate moments—it’s electric. However, it doesn’t serve us as well in everyday conversations. I’ve never been with someone who understood me so quickly. Kyle was everything I desired in a lover last night. With him, I felt completely myself. I didn’t hold back, and it resulted in the most intense memory of my life. Yet, feeling everything so acutely in our day-to-day interactions has the opposite effect. I find myself having to temper my responses. I guide us to the dining room, just as I’m about to eat.

“Want some?” I offer, then quickly realize how that might sound. “I’m sorry. Who’s watching Laurel?”

“Mom,” he replies. “And no thanks, I’m sure she has dinner waiting. On one hand, I don’t appreciate having a curfew like a child, but I do enjoy having family dinners for Laurel. Besides, you and I seem to get into trouble around kitchens and dining rooms.”

I smile at the memory, a warmth spreading through me.

“It was no trouble at all,” I respond with a giggle.

A smile graces his otherwise serious face, revealing the most captivating dimples.

“Seriously,” he says, “I know it sounds trite, but I was just in the neighborhood. I couldn’t pass up the chance to apologize for everything—how I behaved today and last night.”

“To be honest with you, Kyle,” I admit, “I didn’t mind all of your behavior last night. I had a great time. We may not know each other well, but we’re adults. I don’t think we should be judging each other.”

His perfect smile broadens.

“Your parents must have spent a fortune on your teeth,” I tease.

“They didn’t,” he replies. “I just lucked out. But that might be one of the best compliments I’ve ever received. However, I’m not judging you. I don’t have the right to judge others. I’m sure people have been all too eager to fill you in about me.”

“I won’t pretend that I don’t hear the local gossip, and not from broadcasts,” I start.

“I’ll bet,” he says, shaking his head.

“No judgment,” I remind him. “We shouldn’t deny our attraction. It’s evident.”

“We are attracted,” he admits. “I am. If word got out, though, it could cost us both our jobs. I have never had to manage this level of responsibility before.”

I could question him about the baby, knowing that’s what he’s referring to, but he’s unlikely to share the whole story with me.

“I understand that. But I don’t want to keep apologizing for being attracted to you,” I admit. “I mean, what are we waiting for? Last night was scorching.”

“Scorching,” he echoes, raising his brows flirtatiously.

“And I have to say it. You look amazing,” I confess. “Ever since I met you. I don’t know what you’re doing. Is it all the

intense workouts with the team?”

“Okay, I came here to apologize, and we seem to be avoiding the topic of Kirby,” he says gently. “I enjoy standing here, chatting in the middle of your living room. But we need to address certain issues. Like perhaps some of the things you said to me?”

I gasp and take a step back, stunned. I just opened up to this man, confessed my feelings. He came here to apologize, but was his true intention to make me admit I was wrong?

“Kyle Ferguson, did you come here seeking an apology from me?” I challenge.

I’m taken aback. I don’t know whether to find it hilarious or offensive.

“No,” he scoffs. “No. I’m being honest. I came here to apologize to you. But if you feel like it, you can apologize. I mean, I’m not grading tedious essays that are partially plagiarized from a book, but you’re not doing four-hundred-pound squats either.”

“Truce,” I say, holding my hand up to stop him. “Partly because I don’t understand what you just said.”

I kind of do. I don’t want to explain that our jobs are different, fearing I’ll sound like the very thing he accused me of.

“So, do you truly believe he had someone else do his work?” I inquire.

“Yep,” he replies confidently. “Kathryn Dooley teaches his girlfriend for English Lit. I wouldn’t be surprised if their papers were nearly identical. You should ask her.”

“We run them through a plagiarism checker,” I say. “Eventually. But so far, he’s come up clean. But if that’s true, they’ll both face repercussions.”

“You can circumvent those checkers,” he says. “Kids will find a way. And I’ve talked to the kid is all I’m saying.”

“I never had that impression from him,” I comment.

Kyle counters, "It's just intuition. Nothing scientific. I was his age once, and I can assure you I did not write my own papers. The hours spent in my room were not dedicated to cross-referencing Dante's Inferno."

"Okay, okay," I interject, once again holding up my hand. "I don't need to know."

"Yeah, I don't think you need any advice in that regard," he says. "You're a vixen. I thought I was going to need to put something in your drink before I had my way with you."

I gasp, "Excuse me?"

"Sorry, I spend too much time around teenage boys," he admits. "I'm just saying, you surprised me. Pleasantly."

My cheeks warm, but I strive to ignore it.

"For a man who doesn't want to repeat that particular incident," I remark, "you bring it up quite often."

"You're the one who brought it up," he retorts, grinning and winking. "Big time."

I roll my eyes.

"You've been spending too much time with teenage boys," I chide, shaking my head. "In all seriousness, though, did you contact Kirby's parents when he didn't show?"

I steer the conversation away from us. The tension was beginning to simmer.

"I asked Dr. Davidson to do it," he replies. "I'm not familiar with his home situation, but he is."

"All I can say is he's heading down the wrong path," I say. "If he did have someone else write that paper, it wasn't the crowd he's been hanging with."

"Kids like him need the outlet sports provide to save them from themselves," he observes.

"Is that what it did for you?" I question.

He gazes at me, as if I've slapped him, utterly stunned.

"Are you being sarcastic?" he inquires.

Here we go again, I think.

“Why would I be?” I ask. “We need to trust each other a bit more, Kyle.”

“I trust you’ve heard plenty. Who’ve you been talking to?” he stammers. “Esmé? Her longtime boyfriend, who has never bothered to marry her, isn’t exactly prince charming. Don’t bother asking him; he despises me. So yeah, I admit I was a bit of a bachelor, as Dr. Safran likes to phrase it.”

“Who?” I interject, but he doesn’t seem to notice.

“But I’ve never harmed anyone, except maybe myself,” he continues. “I’m a good fath—caretaker to Laurel, and despite your opinion, I am a positive influence on those kids. That’s why I wanted Kirby to come to practice. It’s a far better alternative to whatever you presume he’s doing. He could do a lot worse than turn out like me. Excuse me.”

He takes a step towards the door, but I obstruct his path. Kyle Ferguson is a towering man, and if he wanted to brush me aside, he could.

“Don’t leave,” I whisper.

“I should,” he responds, tension evident in his voice. “I’m already late.”

“Then don’t leave like this,” I plea softly. “I apologize. There’s something about you and me. I seem to constantly say the wrong thing when you’re around.”

He leans in, laser-focused on me.

“So, you’ve never been in this situation before?” he asks flirtatiously.

He’s probing for information about my past, I realize that. But at least he seems to have calmed down.

“No, but I think that’s because I’ve been cautious until now,” I admit, my voice dropping to a seductive whisper. “I can’t seem to exercise caution where you’re concerned.”

I cradle his handsome face and lightly brush my lips against his. He closes his eyes. He doesn’t reciprocate the kiss,

but he doesn't pull away either.

At last, he awakens, his mouth moving against mine, his solid, muscular body coming to life. With effortless strength, he lifts me at the waist, and as if I'm weightless, I float over to the sofa. We are side by side. He clasps my knee, maneuvering me around until I'm straddling his lap. We fit together flawlessly.

He's unrestrained now. His tongue delves deep inside my mouth, tasting, claiming. His hands glide everywhere, finally settling on my buttocks. I'm still clad in my work dress, which is now hiked up to the top of my thighs. He pulls me into him. I can feel his hardness. My body responds with a flush of warmth. He reaches beneath my hem to my panties, slipping a finger inside. I'm wet, ready. I lift myself, allowing him to slide down his pants. Our eyes remain locked as he enters me. Slowly, I lower myself onto him until my weight is resting on his thighs.

"Oooh," he murmurs, his breath raking across his teeth.

Clutching the back of the couch, I extend one leg, moving up and down. Our gazes never waver, except for the occasional moment when the overwhelming eroticism forces me to close my eyes and catch my breath. But I quickly return to the present, locking eyes with him as we slowly rock against each other.

He lifts us off the couch, guiding us gently and with control to the floor. He hovers above me, our eyes still connected as he thrusts deeply inside. Drawing my knees up, I extend my legs, resting them on his broad shoulders. He's so solid, so big, it feels as though I'm resting on marble. He strokes my shins, bending to kiss the inside of my ankles. I tighten around him as he teases me. His light touch traces my inner thigh, causing me to clench and rock against him. The discovery of this erogenous zone surprises me. He continues his attentions, nudging me up the sweet, carnal climb until I'm clenching tightly around him.

"Oh yeah," he whispers. "Let it come."

But he doesn't climax. He possesses the stamina of a demigod. He smiles as I succumb to my pleasure beneath him, stoking my pleasure while watching me. His palms press into the floor on either side of me, and he thrusts into me with increasing speed. My pleasure ebbs as his nears its peak. I reach for him, caressing him as he looks heavenward, his eyes closing.

He cries out. If anyone were walking by at this moment, they would know exactly what was happening. He flips us so we're side by side. His massive hands grip my thighs as he continues to move against me until he can only jerk and twitch. He hums softly, a satisfied smile on his face as he touches me while his orgasm fades. Finally, he steals a glance at me.

"That's a rather compelling apology," I murmur.

He winks at me.

"By the way," I say, "just to be clear, I reciprocate the apology."

He glances at his watch, and we both straighten our clothes.

"I'm in the doghouse now," he admits. "But that will change when I move."

"You've lived with your parents this whole time?" I ask. "Not that there's anything wrong with that."

"Many families around here live in multigenerational homes," he replies. "But it hasn't been working for a while."

He leans down to kiss me.

"You know what I was thinking?" he asks gently. "When I got the house, which needs work, I thought maybe you could help me shop for it. Silly, isn't it?"

"Not at all," I tease. "You know me. I love to nose into things. This will be right up my alley."

He grins at me.

“You do,” he says. “It’s okay, we all have our quirks, and so far, your knack for this has helped me tremendously. Did I ever tell you how much I loathed that bank job?”

“No,” I reply. “But this job definitely suits you better.”

He kisses me again. I walk him to the front door.

“See you at school tomorrow,” he says.

“Goodnight,” I murmur, and while the door is open and the light spills out onto the dark street, I steal another kiss.

The whole town will probably know by morning, but I don’t care. I can’t believe how smitten I am with this man. I am head over heels for him. I double-check all the doors before heading to my room to undress. I draw a bath and strip completely. My body is humming, as if love is dawning on me. I’ve never been in love. I had a friend with benefits, but I never felt this depth of affection for him. That relationship lasted a couple of years.

After enough time for him to have gotten home, he texts me.

“Yep,” he writes. “Doghouse.”

I dry my hands on the shower curtain.

“I’m so sorry,” I respond. “I hope it works out. I’m in the bathtub.”

“Send pictures,” he writes, then quickly adds, “Joking.”

I know many people do that, but I don’t. When I get out, though, I snap a picture of my feet on the bath mat and send it.

“Oh my God,” he writes. “I’m not kidding, that did it for me.”

“Goodnight, Coach,” I reply.

“You’re a wonderful woman, Dawn Moring,” he writes. “Goodnight.”

KYLE

I ‘m discovering that all I need to accomplish something in my life—second only to asking my mother—is to ask David Dye. Much like my family has always been in the banking business, David’s family has owned the General Store since Roseland’s founding. They also own the Fresh Grocer. However, unlike me, David truly owns his businesses. My family employed nepotism to ensure Roseland Bank was always under Ferguson control.

In the past, I arrogantly berated the kids at school and then the townsfolk merely because I was a Ferguson. But what of them, going to work day in and day out to provide for their families? Now that I’ve stepped down from my pedestal at the bank, my eyes are open. I realize that there are many kind people in this town, individuals I could have been befriending rather than alienating.

David is one of those people. Regardless of how I might have treated him in the past, he’s eager to help. And I need that help. Things are moving quickly for me. I’ve acquired a house and am eager to move in completely.

Of course, I’m not completely reformed; I’m still a cynic. I understand that David is a businessman and that graciousness is a powerful marketing tool. He also co-owns a sort of gym with Jaxon Grey, a guy who was a constant irritant back in grad school. David and Jaxon built a gym at the winery, but it’s not open to the public. Despite our history, he keeps inviting me to work out with him. He extends this invitation every other time we meet.

“I’m not quite comfortable with that yet,” I tell him. “Jaxon and I have a history. But I appreciate the offer.”

David is aware of my less-than-friendly past with Jaxon because he was there. He’s slightly older than us, but it’s impossible to have a feud in Roseland without everyone knowing and discussing it. David’s invitations aren’t meant to reopen old wounds; I believe he’s trying to mend them. He’s a decent guy, possibly kinder to me than I deserve.

Today, after work, I’m at the General Store for boxes. I already have the basics at the house—my bedroom furniture and Laurel’s, pots and pans. If Dawn really is willing and wants to help with the remaining furnishings, she’ll likely order them through David. At this point, I don’t have much to move. I just need to dedicate a day to pack up my personal belongings. If I had known how empowering this would feel, I would have done it sooner.

“Hey,” I greet David as he approaches me. “I need boxes.”

“We have a few over in office supplies,” he says.

I can’t help but smile when he uses ‘we,’ because he is the ‘we.’

“No, no,” I laugh. “I meant the boxes you get with shipments. The ones you throw away. I’m here to recycle.”

“Oh,” he replies. “Check by the dumpster. We flatten them and stack them inside the dumpster fence. And then go over to the grocery store. We do the same thing there.”

“Good idea,” I say. “The grocery store.”

“I can ask my crew if they want to make some extra money,” he offers. “If you need movers.”

“I appreciate that, David,” I reply, genuinely touched by the gesture. “Perhaps one of these days I’ll get my head out of my ass and come check out your gym.”

“You seem to be doing alright,” he comments. “Are you working out with the kids?”

“Yes,” I affirm. “And as for moving, I don’t have too much stuff. Besides, the kids don’t know it yet, but they’re my movers.”

He chuckles.

“Well played,” he says. “One of the players, Kirby, was here at the counter getting a burger the other day.”

“Really?” I muse, shaking my head. “He skipped practice. I’ll be curious to hear his excuse.”

“Ah,” David responds. “Yeah, the kid he was with tried lighting up a cigarette and I had to intervene.”

I close my eyes. I’ve been trying to take a different approach than my father, who scrutinizes everything I do, but Kirby presents a challenge. David offers a perspective.

“He’s not your responsibility once he leaves school,” he reminds me.

“True, but it’s a shame,” I concede. “I just hope he doesn’t waste years before realizing it’s better being square.”

“Square,” David echoes, laughing softly and nodding.

Since my life has changed, everything’s been nearly perfect. David trusts me with the keys to the dumpster gate, and I acquire all the boxes I need. I head to my parents’ house to drop them off. My mother watches the baby during the day, so I also have to pick her up. It’s always surprising how much I miss her until I see her again. Despite all the shifts in our life, she seems content. She sleeps well and, according to Mom, seems happy during the day. But I can’t help but wonder.

“Where’s Dad?” I inquire as I secure the baby in her car seat.

“He’s hanging out with Bob Pruitt,” she answers.

“You mean at the 19th Hole?” I ask, irritation seeping into my voice.

My father golfs almost every day, and the 19th hole refers to the bar—not the Brick, because I’m always there, but at the

Roseland Hotel. Apparently, you can't have a drinking problem if your bar is the most elegant spot in town.

"I suppose," she responds, ignoring the underlying issue.

I lean in to kiss her on the cheek.

"What's that for?" she asks.

"For all the times I kept you waiting," I admit. "I'm sorry for everything, Mom. But those days are behind me."

"I'm glad to hear it," she says.

"That's right," I coo, engaging in baby talk with Laurel.

She rewards me with a radiant smile.

"God," I exclaim. "Have you ever seen anyone so beautiful?"

"Yes," she replies. "I have."

I'm aware she means me. I recognize the baby as my spitting image. I'm just anxious for the test results so I can start celebrating officially.

"We need to get you some living room furniture," she suggests.

"I sort of asked Dawn to assist me with that," I admit. "The house thing transpired quickly."

"It certainly did, but the house is charming," she observes.

"I'm glad you approve," I respond. "That means a lot. Speaking of the house, though, would it be possible for you to start watching the baby there? I hate to inconvenience you, but it could help her adjust."

"It's no trouble," she assures. "I can assist with settling in—except for the living room furniture, of course."

"You're okay with me asking Dawn?" I check, "There's so much happening with the baby and the move. Plus, given we both work at the school, we need to be cautious."

"Are you two," she ventures, "involved?"

“Yes, Mom,” I confess. “I’m uncertain where it’s heading, mainly because of our roles at the school. We’d rather not stir up another scandal.”

“Your position is only temporary,” she reminds me. “After you return to the bank, you can see her as much as you like. I find her quite charming.”

“No, Mom,” I interject. “I’ve accepted a permanent position. Dr. Davidson spoke with the Department of Education, both state and local. I found out just as I was leaving. I’m permitted to coach and can be a permanent substitute teacher. He’s even suggested I work on my credential. Once things settle, and my paternity is officially recognized, I plan to pursue that.”

“A teacher in the family,” she muses, wrapping her arms around me.

“Great,” I reply. “I wish my house were ready. I’d invite you and Dad over for a celebratory dinner. I’ll plan something later this week.”

“That would be wonderful,” she agrees.

Later, as I’m settling the baby for the night, I hear a knock on the door. It’s my father. He’s fuming.

“Dad, this isn’t the time,” I warn. “Let me call you an Uber.”

“I don’t need an Uber,” he protests. “Why would I need an Uber?”

“Haven’t you been drinking?” I question, already knowing the answer. “Also, Laurel is settling down for bed.”

Despite my attempts to remain civil, I feel my patience waning. I know I’m close to asking him to leave.

“Drinking is your pastime,” he asserts. “Are you sure you don’t have that schoolteacher hiding here?”

“No, she’s not here,” I answer.

“Probably best to steer clear of her,” he advises.

“Did you come over here just to argue?” I question. “We work together, Dad.”

“All the more reason to avoid her,” he insists, wagging a finger in my face.

“Understood,” I acquiesce.

“People are talking about it,” he warns. “Bob Pruitt mentioned that Esmé told him you two have been spending time together. It was hard enough listening to what people said when you lived at the bar.”

“I’m sorry,” I respond, mustering all the patience I can. “I apologize for the discomfort my actions caused you. But whether you accept it or not, I’m doing better in this job than the one you secured for me. I’ve stopped drinking, Dad.”

My father sways slightly.

“You have?” he questions.

“Yes,” I confirm. “I haven’t touched a drop since the day before Laurel arrived. And maybe you should try it too. You could be a better grandpa to her.”

Tears well up in my father’s eyes. I never truly appreciated the anguish my actions caused my parents, particularly my father, whose pride took a hit. But now, as I worry over every little thing concerning Laurel, I can see the world a bit through his lens.

“I know it’s late,” I offer, “but would you like to look around?”

“Perhaps another time,” he declines.

“Are you sure you’re okay to drive?” I ask, concerned. “Your car can stay here.”

“Actually, you might want to call that Uber,” he concedes.

“Of course,” I reply, reaching for my phone. “I’d drive you myself, but Peaches is asleep.”

He looks at me, puzzled.

“Peaches,” I clarify with a smile. “It’s my nickname for her. Her hair is soft and fuzzy, like a peach’s.”

“Son,” he begins haltingly. “I just wanted...”

He starts and stops, struggling to articulate his thoughts.

“Dad,” I interject softly, placing a comforting hand on his arm. “I understand. We can talk more later. I’ll invite you and Mom to dinner this week.”

With that, my father embraces me. We stand in my doorway, hugging. Granted, he’s had a few drinks, and he might not meet my gaze come morning, but this is a breakthrough for us. We used to be best friends when I was a star player at Roseland. However, our relationship waned when I didn’t perform well at the bank, apart from my expertise at three-martini lunches. Now, I recognize he couldn’t have been a bad father; my own enjoyment of impending fatherhood – if that’s what I am – wouldn’t exist if he hadn’t been one.

The baby, peacefully asleep in the adjoining room, is the catalyst for the recent positive changes in my life. And now, she’s potentially the reason my father and I might reconcile. Handing him my phone, with the Uber app already open, I say, “Here, keep an eye on this. It will show you the car’s location. I’m going to check on Laurel.”

Placing his keys on the kitchen counter, I quietly peek in on Laurel, simply because I need to reassure myself. “I should call you my little miracle worker,” I whisper, leaving the room.

When I return to the doorway, my father is gone. In his haste, he’s unintentionally taken my phone with him. Fortunately, I had a landline installed for instances when my cellphone might falter. Now, more than ever, with Laurel, a reliable means of communication is crucial. I dial my mother’s number, informing her about the situation.

“His keys are here on the counter,” I explain.

“I am so sorry,” she responds, the default apology she extends whenever an argument arises.

“Actually, Mom,” I interject. “It turned out well.”

After ending the call with my mother, I realize I haven't eaten. I merely picked at the school lunch. Although always delicious, it often leans towards the unhealthy side, hence my decision to skip it. Little did I know that it would result in such a prolonged fast. I survey the contents of my fridge, filled with groceries I'd ordered and delivered.

A pang of nostalgia hits me. Standing in the kitchen, I'm reminded of my intimate moments with Dawn. The memories are so vivid, the sensations so intense, that her ghost seems to manifest right before me. In my mind's eye, she sits on my counter, her dress disheveled, hanging off her shoulders, legs parted for me. The urge to call her is strong, but impossible to fulfill with my phone in my father's possession. Glancing at the stove clock, I realize it's probably too late anyway.

Internet connectivity is still an issue. The previous setup was courtesy of the real estate agent to promote the property, and I am still using her account. I must refrain from any inappropriate online activity for now. Eating my yogurt in the solitude of my bedroom, the only place to sit, I pass a few minutes surfing the net on my laptop. After another quick check on Laurel, I head to the shower, managing to towel off just as she stirs awake.

I love her.

DAWN

Hot and cold, much like the weather in our small mountain town, characterizes my relationship with Kyle. He comes by my house, and we're consumed by passion. Then, silence - not even a text asking how I'm doing. I refuse to be that kind of woman: needy. Yet, I find myself thinking about him frequently, making conscious efforts not to mimic the act of kissing him, especially when I'm at school or in town. I've done it at home, lost in my reverie, tilting my head as if I'm kissing a phantom.

But the intensity isn't one-sided. I know he felt it too. The way he loved me, it was unique to us. So, why does he vanish? It's been days since his last visit, to apologize about the Kirby incident. I know he's preoccupied, helping with the baby, but after what we shared, I expected some form of communication. When I get none, I decide to initiate it. We may not be an official couple or even dating, but if we're intimate, I can send a text.

"Good morning," I write. "Have a great day."

It's a beautiful morning. Witnessing the daybreak in the mountains is a spiritual experience. The simple act of texting him alleviates some of the weight, allowing me to enjoy the moment. Yet, the relief is short-lived. I soon find myself yearning for him again. Balancing a private life with a professional one isn't easy, especially when the two overlap. I'm not trying to be clingy, but exchanging morning greetings seems reasonable. I find myself repeatedly checking my phone for a reply, and when I don't get one, it stirs up my longing.

Because if I am honest with myself, even if I did hear from him, I'd just want more.

Regardless, life goes on. My work isn't something I can do remotely. I have to be present, for the multitude of people who rely on me. As I dress for work, I'm acutely aware that I'm choosing my outfit based on the possibility of seeing Kyle. I aim for an appearance that's both demure and alluring. I go to town, grappling with the difference between yearning and obsessing. I'm adamant about not reaching out again, at least for now.

Kyle's probably running drills in the gym due to the dew-damp ground and slight chill in the air. I don't spot the team outside the school, and though I could go find him, I refrain. I treat myself to a coffee at the café, disappointed when I realize Esmé isn't there. She'd usually be someone I could talk to. Instead, I try to engage the waitress.

"Esmé on vacation?" I jest. "How dare she?"

The waitress responds politely, but she's not quite as fun. Esmé would have been a comforting confidante, offering relief from my anxiety. I take my expensive, indulgent coffee to go, then check my inbox and the attendance roster. At least I know he'll be at school. I'm at my desk by 8 a.m., reviewing my lesson plans.

"I'm nuts," I conclude, recognizing that my caffeine and sugar intake probably isn't helping. Still, it does lift my mood momentarily before the inevitable jitters set in.

"Good mood in a cup," I murmur aloud.

With a more flexible workload, Kyle could drop by if he wished. This thought fuels the turmoil that I seem hell-bent on stirring up. But then the bell rings, pulling me from my spiraling thoughts and back to my class. It's not safe to check out when you're in charge of a room full of teenagers - good kids, but teenagers nonetheless. I need to remain present and engaged, no matter what.

I don't see Kyle at lunch, and I find myself having to actively let go of my anxiety once more. It's almost like

detoxing from a drug. My decision to let go provides a brief respite from the anxiety until Kirby walks into my class next period, reigniting my unease. Kirby's presence brings Kyle to mind. He strolls in with the rest of the students, refusing to meet my gaze. Initially, I'd thought of him as a good kid who'd had some hard luck, but now I wonder if his rumored bad influences are more fitting.

"Kirby," I say firmly, "do you have your re-write?" I'm aware I'm directing some of my Kyle-induced angst at him.

"No," he responds curtly. "Give me the zero."

I'm not sure what's happened to him or if I had misjudged him initially. Either way, he's proving to be quite difficult.

"You won't be able to practice this week," I caution.

"That's really none of your business," he retorts.

"Okay," I reply, deciding to try a different approach. "You know, Mr. Ferguson went to bat for you, and you repay him by skipping practice. He's a substitute teacher; he doesn't really know you. But if this is how you want to handle things, that's on you. I won't interfere."

"Coach Kyle is the new coach," he announces triumphantly.

I'm taken aback. I hadn't heard that it was official.

"He's a temporary coach," I correct him, hoping I'm not mistaken. "But yes, he is your coach."

"No," he smirks, "he's permanent. He made the announcement at workouts this morning."

My heart sinks, and I feel foolish. Why hadn't Dr. Davidson announced this? How could I have missed that memo when I hadn't even skipped checking my inbox?

"So," Kirby continues in his smug tone, "I have two more years to make it up to him. Like I said, it's none of your business."

"Well, my business is teaching," I reply curtly. "If you're not here to participate, get out."

Kirby blinks, clearly surprised.

“You want me to leave?” he queries.

“Yes,” I confirm, feeling numb. “Unless you commit, right here and right now, to contribute as much to this class as you do to the field.”

He makes a disgruntled noise and packs up, leaving my classroom. I don’t think I’ve ever lost my temper with a student before, and I can’t help but wonder if my unwarranted anxiety over Kyle fueled my outburst. It occurs to me, perhaps too late, that I might be overly sensitive.

I have a lot on my plate, as does Kyle, but this incident with Kirby really soured my mood.

Afterward, I send an email to Dr. Davidson to inform him of the episode with Kirby. Notably, the class I ejected him from proceeded smoothly. The students were exceptionally well-behaved. Dr. Davidson, in turn, flags me for a face-to-face meeting, which I appreciate.

“We can’t have students disrupting the class,” Dr. Davidson begins pragmatically, “But Kirby is a gifted athlete.”

I had been apprehensive about explaining how Kyle seemingly ignored school policy regarding grades, but Dr. Davidson seemed more focused on winning games than enforcing academic diligence. Choosing to step back, I just nodded and listened. The day ended on a sour note.

After school, I visit the General Store to peruse their sporting goods section. Despite my agitated mood, the weather is lovely. I consider going to the park for a yoga session.

David Dye, the store owner, approaches me as he always does. He’s attractive, and financially secure to boot—a catch by anyone’s standards. However, I’m neither in the mood nor the market for romance. Nevertheless, I stay polite. My rough day isn’t his fault.

“What can I assist you with?” he asks.

His approach feels distinctly small-town. If I closed my eyes and imagined it was a hundred years ago, I could see a

mercantile man acting similarly.

“I miss my gym membership back in San Jose,” I admit to him.

“Well, we have a gym you’re welcome to use,” he offers. “I think you would like it.”

“Is this a sales pitch?” I ask, smiling.

“Absolutely not,” he responds gently.

He’s a kind man—grounded, straightforward. If only I’d met him first.

“It’s at the D’Angelo Vineyards, about five minutes from here,” he informs me. “I kind of run it with the vineyard owners. Have you met Lizzie Brandon or Ellie Grey?”

“No,” I reply quickly. “I’ve only really gotten to know some of my students’ parents, my co-workers, you, and Esmé at the café.”

He nods, eyes twinkling. He’s undeniably handsome, but he’s no Kyle. There’s just something about Kyle that ticks all my boxes—perhaps it’s his aloof nature.

“The gym is fully equipped,” David continues. “It’s not your typical hotel gym, though the one at the local hotel isn’t bad. I believe they’re installing a pool—indoor and outdoor.”

His proposal catches my interest. A visit to the winery might serve as a nice distraction. I decide to take him up on it.

“I’ll check it out,” I say. “Thank you.”

I purchase a new mat—which I don’t exactly need—and a yoga outfit.

“May I change into this in the ladies’ room?” I inquire.

“Be my guest,” he replies. “Come this way, I’ll remove the tags for you.”

My choice of footwear today is wholly unsuitable. I’ve worn a beautiful dress and heels. Grabbing a pair of flip-flops, I change into my new outfit in the bathroom and carefully fold

my work clothes. I meet David at the register, and he hands me a reusable shopping bag for my belongings.

“Perfect,” I remark.

“I would say so,” he flirts back.

“I plan to head over to the park,” I disclose.

Though retail therapy is merely a band-aid for loneliness, it does work to some extent. I feel a bit better.

“Namaste,” he says, winking at me.

Typically, flirting enhances my mood. I’m sure any of my friends back in California—or even Esmé—would call me foolish for overlooking David. Yet, I prefer to torture myself over Kyle. In a hurry, I head to the park. It’s a shame that it appears underused. Given that it’s a weekday, the emptiness is somewhat expected. However, the park features a lovely path that encircles it—a track I’ll likely jog another time. Fortunately, with everything centralized in Roseland, the park runs parallel to Main Street. I’m close to the public, so I’m not in an isolated setting.

Crossing the asphalt path to the lawn, I unroll my yoga mat. I inhale deeply and stretch up towards the sky. I arch my back, extend my hands upwards, and then roll down, bowing until my head touches my knees. I walk my hands out, creating an ‘A’ frame with my body, my posterior raised. I hear footsteps—the unified rhythm of a group. I straighten up and see Kyle and the football team jogging along the trail. He looks at me, his eyes filled with desire.

“Keep going,” he instructs the team, stopping his jog to approach me.

I entertain the thought of giving him the same advice, yet I seize any opportunity to speak with him. Spotting Kirby in the line, I shake my head.

“I didn’t know you guys trained here,” I remark, carefully maintaining a non-confrontational tone.

“I wasn’t aware you trained here either,” he replies, his tone flirtatious.

“We don’t have a gym in town,” I retort, sounding a touch annoyed.

“Is the Roseland honeymoon wearing off?” he asks, a slight smile playing on his handsome face. “Or is it the thing with Kirby?”

Of course, he knew; Dr. Davidson probably spoke to Kirby, then to Kyle and me—just not together.

“I heard,” he expresses sympathetically. “I would’ve spoken to you about it, but I’ve been busy, and my father took my phone.”

Surprised, I quickly reevaluate the situation.

“Are you serious?” I ask. “How long has your dad had your phone?”

“Why?” he flirts back. “Did you send me something risqué?”

“No,” I deny, flustered.

“It’s a long story,” he explains. “I don’t mean to interrupt your practice. I just wanted to touch base and say hi. I understand you don’t approve of Kirby being on the team. But it’s the only positive thing in his life.”

“Discipline is also a positive thing, Coach,” I retort.

Kyle doesn’t pick up on my subtle hint.

“It is,” he concurs.

Engaging in a heated debate at the park isn’t something I desire, especially when I’m genuinely delighted to see him. The encounter teaches me two valuable lessons: firstly, this man drives me to distraction, and secondly, he’s astonishingly attractive in his workout attire. His biceps are incredibly toned—almost as if he’s transformed into an action figure overnight. I struggle to contain my appreciation for his physique. Had he not been engaged in practice, I would undoubtedly have attempted to seduce him.

“Do you run with them?” I inquire, a playful note in my voice.

“Absolutely,” he replies, a hint of excitement in his tone. “Care to join us?”

His gaze travels down my figure until it lands on my flip-flops.

“Too bad,” he remarks. “But if you ever feel like it, let me know.”

“That’s the second invitation I’ve received today,” I retort, grinning impishly. “David Dye mentioned his gym. I’m going to check that out, so I don’t have to do this—although the park is pleasant today.”

“David doesn’t actually have a gym,” Kyle dismisses with a wave of his hand. “It’s merely a collection of equipment housed in a warehouse.”

“Oh, have you been there?” I challenge him.

“No,” he admits with a shrug.

“I’m going to take the winery tour and investigate it myself. David seems to think it’s quite decent.”

“That’s because he’s interested in you,” Kyle smirks.

“Is that so?” I query, raising an eyebrow. “And why would that be?”

He steps closer to me, his voice dropping to a low, intense register, “Because he’s not an idiot.”

KYLE

I find myself in a rush to get home. Since I've announced to my parents that Dr. Davidson has arranged for my permanent employment as the coach, they're eager to take Laurel and me to dinner. Their excitement is palpable, but I worry it might overwhelm the baby. Nevertheless, my father has completely changed his attitude since we had the most heartfelt conversation I can remember us sharing.

"We'll head to Roseland," my dad decides.

If it weren't for the baby, I wouldn't hesitate. However, I also don't wish to argue. My mother is undoubtedly the expert in such matters, and if she sees no issue, I yield to her judgment. Fortunately, I don't have to go over to their house; my new place is practically across the street from the school. It's barely farther than driving across a parking lot. I haven't quite wrapped my head around this singular housing tract—whether it was a peculiar experiment or a developer's fantasy—but for now, it's serving me well. I sprint into the house and straight into the shower. Today, despite my request for my mother to watch the baby at my place, she's at my parents' house.

I find myself wishing I could have invited Dawn, but since I'm not the one hosting the dinner and the thought only occurred to me too late, it's not possible. I remain in awe of the lengths Dr. Davidson went to help me. He should be our guest for dinner, so I add that to my To-Do list. Given the scandal surrounding the people Dawn and I are replacing, I can't even invite her to that dinner, though I yearn to.

I can picture us in the newly furnished house, her incredible hair flowing around her shoulders, elegantly dressed. Roast chicken, I muse, always a reliable choice. These thoughts are a stark contrast to my previous exploits at bars and casual flirtations. As I swiftly complete my shower and look at myself in the mirror, I chuckle aloud.

“I sure shave a lot more now,” I muse.

I dress in a pair of khakis, a pale pink polo shirt, and a blazer before heading back to old town and the hotel. A week ago, if someone told me I’d be moved by my parents’ dinner invitation and eagerly anticipating spending time with them—and hopefully, my daughter—I would’ve flatly disagreed. But now, I can hardly wait to get there.

Upon arriving at the lot, I spot Dawn in her ancient compact car. She doesn’t appear to be dressed for a bar, but a pang of jealousy still flashes across my mind.

“Hey,” I call out to her.

She responds with laughter.

“I know, right?” I remark. “We keep bumping into each other like this. You heading to the hotel?”

“Yeah,” she replies. “I’m stuck in this relentless cycle of ordering takeout, and I can’t seem to break it. I promised myself that after I try this Italian place, I’ll stop.”

“So, you haven’t eaten yet?” I inquire eagerly before quickly adding, “Unless, of course, you’re meeting someone.”

She tilts her head and offers a slow smile.

“I’m not prying,” I stammer, embarrassed.

“Are you fishing?” she teases. “Curious to know if I’m meeting someone?”

She gestures to her outfit, a set of rather frumpy sweatpants.

“I’m practically in my pajamas,” she admits.

“Oh, I certainly hope not,” I tease, and we both burst into laughter. “I don’t know if I’ve mentioned it or if you’re aware,

but I've been offered a permanent position at the school."

"I believe I did hear something about that," she acknowledges with a nod.

"My parents have decided to celebrate by taking me out to dinner," I inform her. "Laurel will be there too."

"That's good. You'll have someone to converse with," she quips.

I raise my eyebrows in amusement at her joke, and we both laugh again.

"We're on a roll," I comment. "Would you like to join us? If you've already ordered, we can simply request that they plate it."

I can see her hesitating.

"I'm not exactly dressed for this place," she protests. "Besides, it's a family event. I wouldn't want to intrude."

"I invited you," I assure her earnestly. "I would genuinely enjoy your company. Your presence would make the celebration even more special."

She still appears uncertain.

"And by the way, my father and I have managed to bury the hatchet," I share. "So, it'll be a peaceful gathering. You've met my mother, and I think you'd appreciate meeting him."

"Okay," she eventually concedes. "I would love to."

"They haven't arrived yet," I tell her. "I planned to wait out front, but I should inform the host that we'll need a highchair."

I quickly dash inside and across the hotel's small lobby to the restaurant host.

"Ferguson," I introduce myself. "Not everyone's here yet, but we will require a highchair. Just a heads-up. I'll be waiting out front."

"Thank you, sir," he responds in a manner suggesting he doesn't recognize me.

I understand why. I've been to the hotel bar a couple of times, but my father is a frequent patron. At one point or another, we Fergusons probably gave him a tough time. I head back outside to join Dawn, resisting the urge to take her hand. I've just received the greatest opportunity in the world, thanks to Dr. Davidson. The last thing I want is to offend him with gossip about me making a pass at the new schoolteacher. Nonetheless, I stand remarkably close to her. It's pleasant that we once again have a moment to ourselves.

"So, you're officially our permanent coach now," she says.

"Yes," I confirm. "Dr. Davidson is incredibly kind. He reviewed all the qualifications, ran everything past the Department of Education, and confirmed that I don't need a teaching credential to be a coach. I can continue teaching on a substitute basis, but once I earn my teaching credential, he'll promote me to a full-time teacher. And, I'll have the flexibility to teach whatever they need."

Dawn appears a tad surprised.

"What would you choose to teach if not phys ed?" she inquires. "I also teach health," I add. "History might be an interesting subject to delve into. However, I don't want to get ahead of myself."

"Congratulations," she responds. "Actually, it was Kirby who informed me. Now that I bring it up, I wish I hadn't."

"Not a positive conversation?" I ask, disappointed that one of my best players seems to be causing trouble.

"He doesn't like me," she admits. "He really doesn't. I tend to push his buttons, and I wasn't planning on reporting him."

She sighs deeply.

"Tell me," I encourage, shrugging.

"No," she declines. "I'm going to give him space. I won't retaliate, report him, or anything. I plan to ignore him."

"But then he's not held accountable, which doesn't benefit him in the long run," I argue, maintaining a gentle tone.

“Indeed,” she agrees, nodding. “I’ve explained all of this to him. But he’s made it clear he doesn’t want to listen. Have you heard of cases where a child from a broken home plays one parent against the other?”

“Yes,” I answer, nonchalantly.

“That’s what he’s trying to do with you and me,” she discloses.

“Like how?” I ask, irritation seeping into my voice.

“It’s inconsequential,” she dismisses. “If he’s uninterested in what I have to offer, then I won’t offer it. I won’t motivate him, counsel him, or discipline him. He can attend my class, pass or fail, and move forward.”

“Wow,” I comment.

“I won’t give him the satisfaction of negative attention,” she asserts. “I’ve never dealt with teenagers before, but in my experience with younger kids, if you don’t react to their antics, they eventually behave.”

I ponder her words.

“So, it’s akin to playing hard to get?” I propose.

“Somewhat,” she agrees. “This way, I prevent him from monopolizing the classroom. I wasted ten minutes on him in front of the class and decided that was enough.”

“What a shame,” I reflect, contemplating Kirby.

“Do you believe I’m making a mistake?” she queries, a hint of defensiveness in her tone.

“Not at all,” I reassure her. “It’s just that he possesses such potential.”

Overriding my earlier reservation, I reach for her hand, driven more by my feelings for her than concerns about potential gossip.

“My father came to my place prepared for a confrontation,” I say. “He was furious. But then I realized where his anger was coming from. He was afraid, something I can relate to.”

I've put my parents through so much. I was a lot like Kirby, although better behaved when I was his age.

"My father was extremely upset about my moving out," I explain. "But he eventually admitted what his anger was about. Perhaps it's the same with Kirby."

"Do you think his behavior is due to his own insecurities, rather than being a typical troublesome teenager?" she asks.

"Likely a mix of both," I respond.

Holding her hand just increases my desire to kiss her, an action I can't afford at the hotel. Most of the town might not recognize her, but they certainly know who I am. By now, the story of the woman I spent a weekend with in Aspen almost two years ago, who dropped a baby on my doorstep, must have spread. I glance at the date on my phone.

"Any day now," I mutter to myself.

"What?" she inquires.

"Nothing," I lie quickly.

"Are they really running late?" she wonders.

"I would call, but my father's driving," I explain. "He picks up his cell phone while driving. He refuses to believe in the efficacy of Bluetooth."

Just as we discuss my parents, they arrive. I'm relieved. I rush down the stairs to welcome them.

"Hey there," I greet them as if it's been ages since our last meeting.

I assist my mother out of the car.

"Everything alright?" I ask.

"The baby was napping," she explains, slipping into baby talk. "She woke up just in time, and now she'll be wide-awake for her daddy's dinner."

"Mom," I caution her. "Dawn is here. We bumped into each other, and I invited her to join us."

My mother turns around abruptly, realizing her mistake. Although it's difficult not to consider the baby as my own, I've maintained that we're merely caring for her. My mother's slip feels awkward in front of Dawn.

"Oh, I didn't notice you there," my mother says to Dawn, as though speaking to a small child.

Perhaps it's my imagination, but I think I see a hint of displeasure on Dawn's face. Maybe she feels like I've been dishonest with her. Nonetheless, she remains polite as my mother fusses over her. I extract the baby from the car.

"Good evening, sir," I greet my father. "Dad, this is Dawn Moring, the new English Literature teacher at the high school. Dawn, my father, John Ferguson."

Ever the gentleman, my father extends his hand.

"How do you do?" he asks in a rigid manner. "Pleased to meet you."

From behind him, I arch an eyebrow at Dawn, silently poking fun at my dad's formality like a mischievous child. As we all head towards the hotel entrance, my father pats my arm.

"Looking in good shape, son," he observes. "Don't you think so, mother? He's as sturdy as ever."

Again, Dawn and I exchange looks, both of us smiling.

"He's the new head coach at the high school," he informs Dawn. "Dad," I chime in, stifling a chuckle, "I'm the only coach."

As we approach the host's stand, I lead the way, cradling Laurel, who beams at me. I plant a kiss on her rosy cheek. Dawn observes us quietly. My father parts our little gathering to announce our presence, and we all trail behind him to our table. I sense Dawn's gaze on Laurel and me. I decide to explain the situation to her after dinner. For now, I want to maintain a positive, lively atmosphere. Above all, my parents have needed this for a while.

"Ah, they have a high chair," my mother exclaims.

After settling Laurel in her seat and allowing my mother to fuss over her, a cocktail waitress swiftly brings drinks for my father and me.

“What are these?” I inquire, ensuring I sound friendly and not like my old abrasive self.

“Those are your drinks,” she replies.

Upon closer inspection, I identify my father’s favorite drink and my usual choice when I’m not opting for beer.

“Thank you,” I express my gratitude. “That was considerate. Was it the bartender’s idea?”

“Yes,” she confirms.

“Dad, we don’t need these, do we?” I pose the question to him.

He negates with a shake of his head.

“If you wouldn’t mind returning these and conveying our thanks to him,” I request politely.

“Okay,” she responds, visibly perplexed.

My father and I glance at each other before bursting into laughter simultaneously.

“What’s so amusing?” my mother probes.

“You had to be there, mother,” he replies, pulling a funny face at the baby.

It’s clear he adores her. We’ve all fallen in love with her.

“Now, don’t get used to staying up late on weeknights, young lady,” he jests with the baby, who responds with a broad grin.

“Aw,” we echo in unison.

“So, is this what you all do?” Dawn inquires with a smile. “Just sit and admire the baby?”

“Essentially,” I confirm, before steering the conversation. “As it stands, I’m the sole coach. It’s a small school. However, given the flexible coaching requirements, I think we could benefit from a coach for the girls’ teams.”

“So, you coach all the teams,” she clarifies, clearly astonished.

“Surprising, right?” I remark.

“It’s astounding what those two did to the school,” my mother comments, shaking her head. “Carrying on an affair like that.”

“Are you referring to the former coach and English teacher?” I ask. “You know they were both married when it happened. That’s why they left. They wanted to avoid facing the ire of their spouses.”

“They were terminated after being caught on security footage,” my father reveals abruptly. “Multiple times. The school board examined all the evidence before dismissing them.”

The news sends me into such a fit of laughter that I nearly choke. Subtly, under the table, I reach for Dawn’s hand.

DAWN

Kyle's father, John, smoothly shifts the conversation. Unexpectedly, I become the topic.

"So, Dawn, are you enjoying Roseland?" he inquires. "You're from San Francisco, correct?"

"San Jose," I clarify, managing a tense smile. "About an hour or so south of San Francisco. Almaden Valley."

"A considerable change, moving from a large city to a small town," he observes. "Did you anticipate our humble size?"

"No," I admit. "Not until I actually moved here. However, I'm really fond of it here."

"Well, that's splendid," he replies.

Kyle's eyes twinkle at me as the waiter finally arrives to take our orders.

"Are we indulging in any appetizers?" John questions.

"Bruschetta," Kyle's mom suggests.

I blush, having forgotten her name if she even mentioned it.

"Bruschetta sounds appealing," Kyle agrees.

"Dawn?" John prompts me.

"I'm fine, thank you," I respond.

Trying to be discreet, I speak out of the side of my mouth.

“What is your mom’s name,” I whisper to Kyle.

John catches me, making me squirm uncomfortably. He pulls a face from across the table. Oblivious, Kyle’s mom is occupied with the baby. Kyle finds the whole situation amusing.

“It’s Trish,” Kyle whispers back.

“Oh,” I acknowledge.

“I’ll clarify,” he promises his father.

I observe that Kyle’s dad enjoys taking control. I can envision him shaping a dynamic where people acquiesce to him. Something about him stirs resentment within me. I don’t know him well, I don’t know all the facets of the narrative that I’m piecing together here and there, but I feel relieved that Kyle moved out.

“See what someone learned today,” Trish announces excitedly, holding Laurel’s cup just beyond her reach.

The child manages to grasp it and drinks from the cup on her own. Kyle and John cheer. John even raises his arms in victory, and the baby imitates him. Another round of cheers ensues. Kyle’s gaze is locked on her. I don’t understand why they’re pretending. That baby has to be his.

“Well Dawn, it is lovely that you could join us,” Trish says, ever amiable.

I surmise she never displays temper or raises her voice. I can imagine her deferring to John. He’s a striking man, and she’s pretty, but she appears a bit worn out. It’s odd to be this way, in a small town when you’re not working outside the home. I suppose they’re just from a different generation.

“Thank you for having me,” I say, “It was a spur-of-the-moment invitation. I apologize for my casual attire.”

“Oh, you look perfectly fine,” she assures me.

That’s easy for her to say; she’s wearing a string of what are unmistakably real pearls around her neck.

“I prefer to be comfortable,” she goes on, attempting to put a positive spin on my decision to wear jogging attire to Roseland’s most sophisticated restaurant.

“Actually, I was about to order takeout from here when I bumped into Kyle,” I clarify.

“Well, we’re delighted you did,” she responds. “I think you mentioned earlier that you used to teach elementary-aged students. How are you faring with the older kids?”

“Well,” I hedge, turning to look at Kyle.

“She’s dealing with a challenge at the moment,” Kyle elaborates. “A student named Kirby.”

“That boy is destined for great things,” John asserts. “He’s incredibly talented.”

“An excellent football player,” Kyle adds. “But he lacks discipline and has a bit of an attitude problem. We should have him spend a day with you, Dad. You could set him straight.”

“For all the good that did you,” he retorts sharply, causing all the adults at the table to flinch visibly.

John looks stunned.

“I misspoke,” he quickly amends.

I could swear he seems on the brink of tears. A quick glance at Kyle reveals a handsome face contorted in pain, though he’s attempting to appear nonchalant.

“I apologize,” his dad says. “I meant that perhaps I wouldn’t be the ideal influence for the boy. He already has an excellent mentor in you.”

Kyle remains silent. He closes his eyes and raises his hand slightly, signaling his understanding of his father’s intent.

“Yeah, so,” I interject. “That’s been a bit of a new experience. However, I love the tight-knit, simple dynamic at the school. And the lunches are five-star.”

I realize I’ve been rambling on. Luckily, the appetizers arrive at that moment. We place our dinner orders and refresh our glasses with water. With no one at the table partaking in

any wine, it's probably for the best. I can just imagine that a few glasses in, John Ferguson could become quite unbearable.

"So, Kirby is a good player?" I inquire. "Are football games a big event here?"

"It's a small town," Trish answers with a smile. "They certainly were when this one was playing."

"I saw your pictures in the trophy case," I tell Kyle. "You were quite the competitor."

"All American," John chimes in.

"Did you play in college?" I ask. "If you don't mind me asking?"

"Hard to believe, but I wasn't large enough," he responds politely.

Perhaps I'm being overly sensitive, but I could swear I see a lingering trace of pain on his face.

"And what about you?" John queries. "Were you involved in any sports? Kyle believes you would make an excellent coach."

"Not exactly," I admit. "I maintain a consistent workout regimen, but I'm not sure that qualifies me for coaching."

"There's more to it than that," Kyle interjects. "Coaching isn't just about athleticism—it's about drawing out the best in a player."

"Like what I was attempting with Kirby?" I ask softly.

"That was your intended outcome," he concedes, "but it wasn't an effective approach."

"Oh," I nod in understanding.

Kyle clarifies our conversation for the others.

"So, the student we've been discussing, Kirby, wrote an essay and Dawn believed he could improve it," he explains. "She gave him a low grade, pending revision. He didn't take it well."

"He's benched from the team for a week," John adds.

“Even back then, the rule was the same,” Kyle flashes a smile at me.

I’m smitten. The way he throws me a sultry glance takes my breath away—he’s that good-looking. And when he speaks, sometimes a couple of dimples appear.

“Did you ever get benched?” I ask, grinning.

“Never,” he replies, straightforwardly.

His gaze is intense, and I’m not sure if he realizes it, but he’s making me incredibly attracted to him. Sitting beside him, I have the opportunity to admire him up close. He’s simply breathtaking.

“So, what happened next?” Trish inquires, spooning baby food from a jar.

“Well, I made a mistake,” Kyle admits.

I gasp. He’s changing his story.

“I wanted Kirby to attend practice so we could have a discussion,” he explains. “But Ms. Moring here believed I was undermining her authority. I mishandled the situation—he didn’t appreciate the leeway I provided. Consequently, he’s been disrespectful towards Dawn.”

John appears frozen, as if engrossed in a dramatic scene.

“He isn’t kicked off the team, is he?” he queries.

“He might be, permanently,” Kyle replies.

“No,” I interject. “I don’t want that.”

“He can’t act like a bully in the classroom,” Kyle asserts. “I expect my players to display good sportsmanship on and off the field. I’ve said this before and I’ll repeat it—I don’t believe he wrote that essay himself.”

“Maybe you should try to understand his circumstances,” Trish suggests.

“I intend to,” he affirms. “I’ll give him every opportunity. But if he’s gonna be a little pain in ass... ” He flashes an

apologetic glance. “Excuse my language. If he’s disrespectful, he needs to be sidelined.”

“But if he’s a troubled kid, sports might help him turn things around,” Trish counters.

“That was my line of thinking when I didn’t back Dawn’s decision,” Kyle concedes. “But he doesn’t seem to value second chances.”

I surreptitiously reach under the table for his hand. He turns to me.

“What exactly are you trying to grab?” he whispers, his tone low and swift.

Regrettably, I can’t control my laughter—I giggle silently, interrupted only by the occasional gasp.

“I believe she’s just fatigued,” Kyle quips, covering for me.

Unable to halt my laughter, I excuse myself from the table.

“Excuse me,” I manage to sputter out.

I aim for what I believe is the exit, but instead end up in the elevator area. Kyle trails behind me. He presses the elevator button, and as it opens, he guides me inside. We spend our ride up to the top floor—and back down—locked in a passionate embrace.

“Alright,” he murmurs, “Feeling better?”

Yet the fit of giggles returns. Rolling his eyes, he presses the button for the top floor. His hands roam over me fervently. We’re almost vibrating with the intensity of our kisses, as our lips meet eagerly.

“God, I want you,” he rasps, “But I need to think about something less... exciting. I can’t return to the table like this.”

“Garbage trucks,” I suggest, attempting to conjure up the most off-putting things to help him regain composure. “Liver and onions.”

“Liver and onions?” he echoes, bursting into laughter himself. “Okay, I need to return to them. Take a moment if you

need it.”

“Gorgonzola cheese,” I continue.

“Enough,” he retorts. “I’m good.”

He holds my hand as we walk through the lobby. I’m not sure how this public display of affection might affect our work relationship, but that’s a conversation for a different, more private time. If we continue this way in public, it may necessitate a discussion with our principal or perhaps even the school board.

Dinner has arrived. Our brief interlude—two elevator rides to the top of the hotel—seems to have not disrupted the evening too much. Nevertheless, I can’t help feeling embarrassed about potentially spoiling the dinner.

“Mr. and Mrs. Ferguson,” I begin, “I must apologize for my behavior. You’d think I was one of my students.”

“We’re glad Kyle could assist you, whatever the issue,” John responds. “And please, call us by our first names, John and Trish.”

“Thank you so much,” I respond, unsure whether I might burst into laughter again.

It’s waiting just beneath the surface.

“This looks delicious,” Kyle comments, drawing our attention to Laurel’s plate. It’s a divided baby dish.

“Next time, we should seat her between us,” he proposes thoughtfully.

“That’s a splendid idea,” Trish agrees.

“Is that yummy food?” he asks the baby, then turning to his father, he inquires, “How’s your steak, Dad?”

“Perfect, as always,” he replies, enjoying his meal.

“Ladies,” Kyle addresses us. “How are your meals? Mom, if you want to eat, I can take care of her.”

“I’m fine, dear,” she reassures him.

“This meal is excellent,” I express my appreciation. “Thank you again for the invitation. Mr. Ferguson—John, Kyle tells me you’re a golf enthusiast.”

“I am indeed,” he confirms. “And do you play?”

“Yes, I do,” I respond. “We had some splendid golf courses back in San Jose.”

“Trish also plays,” John mentions.

“I usually wrap it up after nine holes,” Trish adds.

“Do you enjoy the game?” I ask her, making sure I don’t come off as provocative.

I’m curious if she engages in golf merely because her husband does.

“I do find it enjoyable,” she admits.

That’s not exactly the same, I think.

“I can’t start playing again,” I confess. “I’m afraid I’ll catch the bug, and it’s challenging to juggle work and the urge to play golf.”

John laughs. It feels rewarding that I said something amusing to him, yet I’m conscious of falling into the pattern of seeking his approval, just like Trish and Kyle seem to do.

“Is she getting enough to eat?” Kyle inquires out of the blue.

“She seems to be eating continuously,” I observe with a smile. “She’s undeniably adorable. You mentioned you were babysitting her?”

Perhaps I shouldn’t have brought it up. I’m incredibly curious, but if they had wanted to share the story behind it, they would have done so immediately. Yet, it irks me. It’s none of my business, but I can’t shake it off. The table falls silent. No one responds. They keep their heads down, engrossed in their meals. My chop salad is divine, so I assume their meals are equally satisfying. However, they can’t be so engrossed that they didn’t hear my question.

“Could she try some mashed potatoes?” Kyle consults his mother.

“I believe that would be alright,” Trish concurs, taking Kyle’s spoon and gently blowing on the food.

“So, when did Dr. Davidson deliver the news?” I inquire, attempting to ignite a casual conversation.

“He shared it with me just the other night,” he responds promptly.

“But I accidentally walked off with his cellphone,” John interjects.

So, your hearing is perfectly fine, I internally remark.

“Oh, she seems to like it,” Trish announces, then shifts to baby talk, “Do you enjoy grownup food?”

“Cool,” he says. “I’ve been considering buying a ricer to prepare her meals.”

“I already have one,” Trish discloses. “I just carry jars of baby food for convenience, and I like that they’re sealed, eliminating the need for refrigeration.”

“Ah,” Kyle acknowledges, before turning to me, “Apologies for the digression. So, Dr. Davidson called me and informed that he’d consulted the Department of Education, and they said he can hire anyone he wants for a coaching position.”

“And you could coach while still working at the bank,” John chimes in. “Your old salary must far exceed a teacher’s pay. No offense, Dawn.”

“Certainly not,” I respond. “I manage just fine. I have all I need and more. I appreciate being able to walk almost anywhere.”

“We can, but as you’ve noticed, we drive quite often, just like anywhere else,” Kyle remarks. “Roseland does get dark, so at times driving becomes an absolute necessity.”

“And it snows here, doesn’t it?” I ask, feeling a sudden surge of romance.

“Both of our places have fireplaces,” he mentions, a warm smile lighting up his face.

“Well, that meal was delightful,” John comments. “A toast.”

He raises his water glass, and we follow suit. Trish gives the baby her cup, holding and lifting the child’s hands for her.

“To Kyle, on his new venture as Roseland High’s coach,” he declares, his eyes welling up with emotion. “I’m proud of you, son.”

“Here, here,” I agree, reaching for my wallet. “I don’t mean to dine and dash, but I have class in the morning. I’ll cover the cost of the chopped salad.”

“Keep your money,” John insists. “You’re our guest.”

“I appreciate it,” I respond. “However, I did intrude.”

“You were invited,” Kyle counters, a suggestive glint in his eyes.

“Thank you,” I respond.

“I’ll walk her to the car,” he offers.

He takes my hand again, leading me out of the hotel to the parking lot. A shared kiss isn’t an option, though at this point, it likely doesn’t matter. Everyone must be aware.

“Thank you for joining us,” he expresses.

“Kyle,” I start. “Can we discuss certain matters?”

“Regarding us and our jobs?” he inquires gently.

“That, among other things,” I clarify. “I’m referring to how you and your family seem to ignore the fact that Laurel is your daughter.”

KYLE

I grasp Dawn's face gently with my hands and lower myself to her level.

"Hold on a moment," I tell her. "I need to ask my parents to look after Laurel for a while so we can talk. Is that alright?"

"Sure," she responds, agreeable.

I dash back into the hotel, drawing more attention than I intend. Despite being a weeknight nearing nine o'clock, the bar is buzzing with activity.

"Mom, Dad," I start. "I'm sorry to spring this on you, but I need to have a conversation with Dawn. Could you take care of Laurel for a bit? I'll return soon to fetch her."

"Is everything okay?" my father questions.

"Absolutely," I assure him. "I just need to iron out a minor issue."

"Was it something we said?" my father worries.

"Not at all, this evening was fantastic. Both of you are wonderful," I praise them. "I am so lucky to have you. And Laurel."

I plant a gentle kiss on Laurel's forehead.

"Why don't you let her stay the night?" my mother suggests.

"I suppose, but this is the last time," I concede. "Promise."

"Go, go," my father urges. "We've got this."

Even though my parents aren't particularly old, caring for a baby – especially one not yet walking – all the time must be exhausting. I resolve to change that. But, pieces of my life I never envisioned having are fitting together. For the first time, I consider the possibility that I might actually be content. I hurry back to Dawn, grinning.

“Hey,” I greet her. “Just needed to touch base with my parents. Where do you want to go? I realize it's late. We could head to my place, but I'm still lacking furniture.”

“Why don't we just sit and talk?” she proposes. “Your car or mine?”

We slide into her compact vehicle. I knew it was small, but sitting in it confirms it. I reach beneath the seat to adjust it backwards.

“I'm sorry,” she chuckles. “Would you prefer to try your car?”

“This is fine,” I fib. “So, you're curious about Laurel's situation. Remember the first day we met, when the deputy dropped her off at our house?”

Her face registers surprise. Recounting the story out loud feels more intense than I had anticipated. It's harder than I expected to articulate.

“So, about two years ago, well, roughly twenty months back, I spent a couple of weeks in Aspen at our family's retreat. I engaged in the same kind of behavior I was known for at the Brick. It was a blurry, alcohol-fueled period. I met a woman, and we spent the weekend together. Laurel is the outcome. The woman never told me about her, and we never spoke again.”

“You didn't maintain any kind of contact after that weekend?” she inquires.

“I couldn't,” I confess, feeling a pang of guilt. “She was married.”

“So, why don't you acknowledge Laurel?” she asks.

“Because,” I admit, “I’m awaiting the results of a paternity test. I took it the day she arrived, and I’ve been waiting ever since. But I fell in love with her instantly.”

“What happens if you’re not the father?” she queries.

“I am her father,” I assert.

The notion that the results could dispute my fatherhood disconcerts me. I can’t envision that outcome. All my planning is predicated on the belief that the test is merely a formality. I take her hand.

“I believe you are,” she concedes. “It was just perplexing.”

“Well,” I confess, “I’ve never been in this position before. I wasn’t sure which path to take. This is such a small town. We have to live and function here. I don’t know what comes next. My dad’s lawyers are on standby. So, this is where we stand.”

“When will you find out?” she inquires. “Does it really take this long?”

“Seems so,” I reply. “I’m listed on the birth certificate as her father. So legally, I already am.”

Suddenly, I start shaking. It’s an unexpected reaction I can’t control.

“I guess I’m really scared,” I reveal.

She wraps her arms around me.

“You’re cramped in here,” she comments, given the tight space.

“That’s what she said,” I jest.

“You’re like one of my students,” she gently chides.

“I’m sorry for keeping you in the dark,” I admit. “Part of me hesitates to claim her as mine because the pain would be unbearable if she’s not. I am her father in every sense. Her transition to being with me has been the easiest thing in the world. You’d expect her to be extra fussy, but she’s not. She knows she belongs with me.”

“That sounds about right,” she responds, smiling tenderly.

“The midweek thing I do,” I confess, “the time I asked you to babysit, and I missed it? Those are parenting classes.”

“Goodness, and here I accused you of going out on a work night,” she recoils.

“It’s okay,” I reassure her. “You probably heard about my reputation. You couldn’t have known. And I couldn’t tell you.”

“I was jealous,” she admits.

“You thought I was seeing someone?” I ask, completely enthralled.

“More like hooking up,” she concedes with a nod. “I’m such a dork.”

“You’re incredibly beautiful,” I blurt out unexpectedly. “Everything has transformed for me since Laurel arrived. First Laurel, then you, and now the job.”

I fall silent for a moment, searching for the right words and the bravery to share something more with her.

“I was rather harsh when you suggested me for the job,” I start.

“You apologized,” she interjects, trying to spare me.

“Not adequately,” I counter. “I truly want to thank you for seeing something in me. Another thing has changed, and I’m grateful for it, though I’m not proud.” “I just yearned to be the life of the party. But that trend died out long ago. Regardless of what you’ve heard or might hear, I’ve changed. And I intend to stay this way, primarily for Laurel’s sake.”

“You have to do it for yourself, too,” she advises.

“I’m not quite there yet,” I admit. “But I will be. I like this lifestyle. I love coaching. So, thank you.”

Though it’s dark outside, a security light provides just enough illumination that Dawn and I aren’t entirely hidden. I don’t want to jeopardize my job, but I can’t resist stealing a kiss. I pull back.

“I don’t want my parents catching us making out in the parking lot,” I chuckle. “By the way, we have the night free.

My mom's taking Laurel this one time. That reminds me, I need to find other babysitters apart from mom. Not that I plan to leave her often."

"Well, you have me," she offers.

"That's silly," I retort. "If I need a babysitter, it will probably be because I'm spending time with you."

"That's not required," she says gently. "We now have two lovely new homes. I enjoy staying at home, cooking, just being together."

"And sex," I interject.

She laughs in surprise.

"Oh my God," she exclaims. "And definitely that, too. Home is better unless there's a secret place around here I'm unaware of where we can do that."

"Listen to you," I tease. "Can you believe what my dad said? That our predecessors were caught on camera? I want to track them down. I wonder if we could search the internet."

She laughs heartily.

"You want to see the videos of the two who quit?" she questions.

"Yes," I confess readily.

"You're incorrigible," she says with a beautiful smile.

"Send me to detention," I purr.

Instantly, we're sharing a silent laugh. But then an idea strikes me.

"That could be fun," I say suggestively. "Play 'naughty school'."

Her face is a picture of smiles.

"Role-playing?" she teases softly.

"I've heard it's quite therapeutic," I counter.

"Well, then I have just the costume chest for you," she says provocatively, casting a seductive gaze my way.

I nearly choke in surprise, unsure if she's joking.

"Here I thought I'd have to coax you out of your shell," I playfully admonish. "And you turn out to be quite the vixen."

"What," she begins, emphasizing each syllable. "Are you implying?"

"Well," I start, "I found you attractive right away."

"In the small department store," she specifies.

"Yeah," I affirm. "I'm not sure if that's just a male thing or peculiar to me, but yes, I sized you up immediately."

She feigns a punch at me.

"For what exactly were you sizing me up?" she questions, arching her brow.

"Sex, obviously," I reply with a grin.

"Do you do that with all women?" she inquires, smiling.

She isn't anxious or upset, just engaging.

"Truthfully," I admit, "I have. But I don't think I'll do that for anyone else but you."

We're still in the parking lot, but the compulsion to kiss her is overwhelming. I lean in for a quick one, but she nudges me away, still keen on questioning me.

"So, you thought," she carries on, struggling to contain her amusement, "I'd be a prim, proper, straight-laced lay?"

"Lay?" I wince theatrically, mocking myself. "That sounds so tawdry."

"Well, did you?" she presses, giggling.

"Why do I suspect this conversation will end with an 'I've got news for you'?" I wonder.

She nods and breaks into hearty laughter.

"Alright, alright," I chuckle, trying to calm her down. "My parents are coming out with the baby. They'll wonder what's going on in this car."

We settle down, simply looking at each other.

“I need to assist them in placing her in the car,” I announce, feeling a pull of responsibility.

I haven’t felt this relaxed or whole in a while as I do now, conversing with this beautiful woman. Yet my need to attend to my daughter surpasses everything else. I step out of the car.

“Let me help you with her,” I offer.

“Shh,” my mother whispers and mouths ‘she’s asleep.’

I experience a pang of guilt. I can’t pinpoint why it hurts so much, but it does. It’s overwhelming and something I’ll have to discuss in my parenting class. I’m burdened with parental guilt. I won’t see the baby until after work tomorrow.

“Goodnight, son,” my mother whispers, planting a kiss on my cheek.

They both get in the car, wave, and drive off. It dawns on me how much they still love and care for me. They adore my daughter, if she indeed is my daughter, but primarily, they’re looking after her for my sake. I’m engulfed by waves of regret for the way I’ve disregarded my life for so long. I must appear like a statue, as Dawn comes out to join me.

“Are you okay?” she questions.

I’ve transitioned from feeling on top of the world to being devastated.

“I’m not sure,” I confess.

“Did someone say something hurtful?” she asks, with concern.

She somewhat reminds me of my mother, keen to alleviate my distress. I reach for her and pull her close.

“I just missed my daughter today,” I confess, my voice hoarse.

“I’m sorry,” she replies. “I shouldn’t have probed you about her. I was being petty.”

“No, I’m glad we talked,” I assure her, not willing to let go. “I thoroughly enjoyed our conversation.”

All the regrettable encounters I had with women at the bar couldn't compare to the precious moment I've just shared with her.

"It felt like I was back in high school," I admit, reminiscing about my high school crush, Ellie Pruitt.

I took her for granted, and when she found someone who appreciated her, it stung. It's the reason why I can't join David Dye for a workout; the man who owns both the winery and the gym also won the girl. Now, holding Dawn in my arms, the lingering resentment dissolves. I'm genuinely happy for them. If they share the connection I've just experienced, I wouldn't blame them for pursuing it.

"That's really sweet," she responds.

The night descends, wrapping us in velvet darkness. We stand in the parking lot, lit by the security light that resembles the glow of an intense moon. It dramatically illuminates Dawn's beautiful face.

"It's hard to believe you could just pack up and leave," I muse.

She appears confused and seeks clarification.

"Do you mean from San Jose?" she questions.

"Yes," I affirm, giving her a gentle smile. "Like, leaving behind guys, friends, and family?"

"That's life in a big city," she says. "It's nothing like here. You might encounter familiar faces, but it's impersonal. I wouldn't expect anyone to buy me lunch just because we bumped into each other at a store."

I nod, admiring her resilience.

"We should probably continue this conversation somewhere else," I suggest. "Not intending to hustle you into bed, but let's remember why our predecessors lost their jobs."

"Poor things," she chuckles. "They just couldn't keep their hands off each other."

“I hope their relationship survived,” I muse. “Their passion sent them packing.”

“You make them sound like fugitives,” she giggles.

“It must have been worth it,” I speculate. “They risked everything, shattered hearts, disrupted lives, all to be together.”

I recall the weekend in Aspen, from the fragments of my memory.

“Oh wow,” I exclaim, struck by a sudden realization.

“What?” she probes.

“Well, it’s a harsh truth,” I begin hesitantly. “I probably shouldn’t bring it up, but I feel I can share anything with you. I can’t believe you’re not judging me.”

“Hope springs eternal,” she quips.

I playfully swat her on the rear.

“I was just reflecting on how Laurel’s mom jeopardized her marriage for a reckless weekend with me,” I confess. “And she chose her marriage over the baby. I suppose. I’ll figure it out when I go to court to secure official custody. But I couldn’t do that—choose passion over a child. The moment the deputy brought her into my house, paternal instincts kicked in. I needed to ensure she was fed.”

“Do you know her story?” she inquires. “The mother’s?”

“She gave up her rights,” I reply. “That’s why the deputy handed the baby to me. I just want our family lawyer to confirm it. Regardless, she stays in my home. No one is taking that baby away from me.”

DAWN

Before Kyle exits the car, I reach out to touch his face. Initially, I tap him lightly to get his attention, but the atmosphere in the car instantly intensifies. Our eyes meet, sparking a silent, almost telepathic, understanding. I know he feels it, too.

“Thank you,” I express earnestly.

“It was my dad’s treat,” he modestly replies. “But you’re very welcome. You made it enjoyable.”

“I appreciate that,” I respond. “But what I meant was, thank you for being honest. I really didn’t intend to pry. Actually, let me correct myself. Since we’re being candid, I did intend to. I wanted to know. She looks just like you.”

“Now that’s honesty,” he remarks. “And she really does. I can’t deny it.”

“That’s why people get confused when you mention you’re babysitting,” I clarify.

“It won’t be for much longer,” he says. “The results should arrive any day now. That said, why don’t you follow me to my new place? I’ll show you around. If it’s getting too late, just let me know and we can wrap it up.”

I trail behind Kyle to the house he recently rented. It’s charming from the outside. Although I’m familiar with this neighborhood, which is also my own, I don’t recognize the house. When I park behind him, I’m sure my puzzlement is evident.

“What?” he inquires.

“I’ve been all around here, I thought,” I reply. “I don’t think I’ve ever seen this house.”

“You wouldn’t have,” he jests. “It was practically hidden behind trees. I had the team trim the bushes.”

I’m taken aback.

“You had the team do your yard work?” I question.

He shrugs.

“Hey,” he justifies, “if it’s good enough for the boy scouts, it’s good enough for Roseland High School football. They loved it. I ordered pizzas from the place we just ate at. Expensive, yes, I need to watch my language. It was a lot.”

“I wish you had invited me,” I tease.

“I wish I had too,” he says, drawing me into his arms. “But, like now, I wouldn’t be able to keep my hands off you.”

He kisses me slowly beneath the gentle rustling of the tree in front of his house. He holds my hands, guiding me towards the door as he inserts the key.

“I should keep the lights on,” he mentions. “So people think someone lives here.”

His house doesn’t look too different from mine, except there’s no distinct dining room.

“So, living room,” he begins. “Fireplace. I can’t wait. It’s going to start getting cold soon. Kitchen. Original appliances. I’ll put a small table in here, but I plan on placing a drop-leaf table in the living room. That way, we can dine in front of the fire.”

“Nice,” I comment.

“Here’s the baby’s room,” he indicates.

“What are you going to call her when she’s thirty?” I tease.

He gives me a sidelong glance.

“I haven’t the slightest clue,” he says with a wink. “Bathroom. As you can see, I’m all set up except for the living

room/dining room. And of course, my bedroom.”

“No master bath?” I ask.

“Nope,” he confirms. “I figure I won’t be in much competition with Laurel for the bathroom for at least another thirteen years or so. It’s small but really quite adorable.”

“Can I still assist you in picking out furniture?” I ask, ideas already swirling in my mind.

“Yes,” he replies, his voice husky.

“Do you have internet?” I question eagerly.

“I do,” he says in a lower tone. “But we aren’t going to look at furniture now. Come here.”

He approaches me like he’s about to sweep me off my feet. I place a hand on his chest to halt him.

“One moment,” I interject. “The couple of times we’ve been together, have been exhilarating and delightful. And I don’t mind being discreet. But I’m not comfortable with something we can’t even tell your parents about.”

“What do you mean?” he inquires, puzzled. “I just invited you to dinner.”

“I understand and I appreciate that,” I respond. “And we must be cautious due to what our predecessors did. But I don’t want to be, you know...”

He leans down so that we’re at eye level.

“A...?” he prompts, a playful glint in his eyes.

“I’m serious,” I reiterate.

“I am too,” he affirms. “I like you. I like you a lot. I don’t know what’s happening between us, but something definitely is. But so many things are going on in my life right now. The same goes for you. You’ve just moved, landed a new job. I feel like once I get the results of the paternity test, I will feel more settled and I can start planning from there.”

“I’m not pushing you to make any sort of commitment,” I say. “It’s way too early for that. But I feel like the times we’ve

been together happened purely by chance.”

“I understand what you’re saying,” he acknowledges.

“I would like to maybe go on an actual date with you,” I suggest. “Not just meet up casually.”

“I respect that and I understand,” he assures. “I think out of fairness to Dr. Davidson, we should tell him. Rather than let him find out from some rumor. We’ll assure him that we promise to keep it quiet and discreet. We’ll let him in on it. And if anyone else asks us about it, we’ll simply deny it. Until there comes a time, if this becomes something more, we can publicly acknowledge it. How does that sound?”

“I think it sounds like an excellent plan,” I agree. “I feel better already.”

“For what it’s worth,” he adds. “The other day, when my dad and I had our talk, I told him that we’ve been seeing each other.”

“You did?” I question, surprised.

“Yes,” he responds. “So, perhaps tomorrow we should plan on telling him, together, first thing. Because my dad heard it from someone else.”

“Okay,” I agree.

“And then if you’re not busy,” he suggests. “You and I could have a date.”

“We can go to my place,” I propose. “With the baby, and have dinner. That way, you won’t need a babysitter.”

“You don’t want a traditional date?” he asks.

“No,” I whisper. “I just want to spend time with you.”

It’s as if someone has switched on a powerful magnet because the attraction between us is so strong. It feels as though there’s a cord tethered to me, pulling me towards him, almost against my will. I have no choice but to yield. His love-struck expression reveals that he feels the same way I do. A longing for him surges within me. I fling myself into his arms, and we tumble onto his bed.

“How wonderful is this?” he murmurs. “I enjoyed the kitchen counter and your sofa, but my bed has felt quite empty.”

I kiss him gently, brushing his lips, nose, and eyelids with soft pecks, as if claiming him as mine. I nuzzle beneath his chin, exploring his sensitive spots. He cries out as I find a sweet spot just below his jawline. His masculine, earthy cologne stirs something within me. I inhale deeply before nipping at his neck.

He’s wearing a soft jersey cotton polo shirt. His physique is now defined from working out with the team, keeping up with guys slightly more than a decade younger. His transformation was quick. I push his shirt upwards, baring his chest. He pulls it over his head while I admire his magnificent form.

“God,” I mutter. “You are spectacular.”

I straddle his large frame. His size makes me feel delicate sitting atop him. My hands spread across his warm, solid chest, his skin soft as a baby’s. I lean down, pressing my lips to his belly, playfully biting as I go. I can feel his hardness beneath me.

Kyle strokes my hair, then twirls it gently around his fingers as I unfasten his pants. He assists in lowering his khakis. I take him into my mouth. His breath hitches as I tighten around him.

His hips lift and lower, slowly rocking into me. My hand grips the base of his shaft as I bob up and down.

“No, no,” he whispers, tapping my shoulder. He gestures for me to rise. I pin him down with my knees while he lifts my hoodie over my head. I’m dressed like I’m warming up for a track meet, but I’m grateful that I’m wearing my sexy lingerie underneath. Regardless of what I’m wearing on the outside, I always opt for expensive lingerie. He unclasps my bra, instantly revealing my breasts. A soft yet deep growl rumbles from his chest at the sight of me. He gently cups my breasts, which feel so soft and delicate against his strength and warmth.

Now, he holds me just below my breasts at my ribcage. His hands are so large they cover me like a bustier. He guides me upward and I take over from there. I grasp his arousal and lower onto him, letting my weight settle onto him.

He's buried as deeply as possible. I arch my back, tilting my head towards the ceiling as arousal floods me like a euphoric drug. He literally intoxicates me.

Now, Kyle grips my hips to guide me back and forth. I ride him, swaying in slow, sensual motion. I play with my breasts and watch him with smoky eyes, dark and hazy. Tousling my hair for effect, I moan, intentionally exaggerating the sounds of pleasure to tease him.

"You are the most alluring woman I've ever known," he murmurs.

I smirk devilishly, then swoop down dramatically, cascading my hair over his chest. It lightly brushes his skin in a feathery sweep. Aware of his ticklish belly, I sway the ends of my hair to playfully torment him, all the while maintaining a counter rhythm to his movement.

"Good God," he gasps, clearly enjoying the attention.

His breaths are now harsh and steady, growing more intense. I have total control. His head moves from side to side, his eyes closed as he tries to match my rhythm. I sit upright and quicken my pace. Gently, I trail the tips of my fingernails across his chest, sending waves of tingles through him. Intentionally, I tighten around him in intervals to heighten his pleasure. It won't be long until he's thrashing beneath me.

Suddenly, he flips me over, taking the dominant position. He moves like a storm, a relentless force. Now, I am the one writhing beneath him as he drives into me with fervor. He doesn't stop until we're both crying out, moving against each other to savor every exquisite sensation of our shared climax.

Kyle relaxes, careful to avoid resting his full weight on me—nearly a hundred pounds heavier. We lie still, waiting for our breaths to normalize. A smile graces my face. Our hands find each other on the bed. Finally, we are quiet and still.

“I wonder,” he muses eventually, “about the families that lived in this house before me. I should know who some of them were, working at the bank. But I lie in bed, trying to sense the stories that unfolded here.”

“That’s quite fascinating,” I say, adoring him even more for that sentiment.

“Couples who went to bed in this very room,” he continues. “And did what we just did. Shared Christmases and graduations. Hopefully, they led good lives.”

His voice falters. I hadn’t sensed anything off before, but now I look at him to confirm.

“Are you okay?” I inquire, noticing his emotional state.

“I’m grateful to be awake,” he admits. “But accepting that I wasted so much time not truly living is tough. I don’t have a lot of downtime to dwell on it, what with everything changing. But when I do, it’s a heavy notion to reconcile.”

“Many people don’t wake up, as you put it,” I say. “You did, and you’re handling all the changes in your life commendably. Don’t waste another minute now, regretting wasted time.”

“Yeah,” he concedes and gives my hand a squeeze. “When we have time, and perhaps when Laurel has spent a while at mom’s, I’ll show you all the places we used to visit when I played ball.”

“You mean apart from Roseland?” I question.

“No,” he chuckles. “In Roseland. You couldn’t have asked for a better place to grow up. It was quite storybook-like. Our parents trusted us implicitly. We would sneak out and have all kinds of adventures. And not a drug addict or troublemaker among us.”

His face suddenly changes.

“Jesus,” he murmurs, squeezing his eyes shut.

He did that earlier, when we were in the throes of passion. But now, he looks like he’s in pain. For a man who can come off as incredibly stoic, he’s truly sensitive.

“I was the closest thing to that,” he admits. “I was the black sheep.”

“Okay, rule,” I declare, his pain echoing in the pit of my stomach. “No self-deprecation. I like you. And I don’t want you to spend a moment of our time together confessing what a terrible person you believe you are. Seriously? I would love to see the places where you guys had fun, but you’re not allowed to berate yourself. We can take Laurel out in a stroller, and we can make an afternoon of it.”

“Oh no,” he counters, a gleam in his eye. “It has to be at night. We can definitely spend the day with the baby, strolling somewhere. But I want you to sneak out with me, Dawn, like I did back in the day.”

“Well, what’s the saying?” I question. “You get hung for a sheep as a lamb? Might as well go for the sheep.”

He chuckles, knitting his brows.

“What on earth does that mean?” he asks.

“We’re already the talk of the town for kissing, holding hands, and dining with your family,” I explain.

“Yes, but we’re going to speak with the principal tomorrow,” he reminds.

I lean in, so my face is a mere breath away from his.

“But we’re sneaking out tonight,” I whisper, a hint of mischief in my voice. “If you don’t back out.”

Kyle narrows his gaze at me. His eyes are dark, almost predatory. I think I just flipped his bad boy switch to ‘on’.

KYLE

Dawn grins at me, reminiscent of my high school girlfriend when I asked her the same question.

“Are you certain?” I ask. “We’re going to be exhausted tomorrow.”

“So, come Friday night,” she replies, “we’ll turn in early.”

“Why do I predict a movie day in class tomorrow,” I muse.

“What does that mean?” she questions.

“Well, back in the day, I suspect I had a history teacher who may or may not have been a bit too fond of his drink. We knew that when he declared it a movie day, showing us a film instead of teaching class, he had overindulged the night before.”

“Aw,” she sympathizes.

We both freshen up and dress. She opts out of the sweats, instead slipping into a modest jean skirt and a cashmere sweater she keeps in the trunk of her car.

“You carry a change of clothes around with you?” I query.

“I was actually planning to donate these,” she reveals. “I will another time.”

It’s going to be brisk outside, making the sweater a sensible choice. Plus, she looks stunning in soft wool. She’s a head-turner.

“Just a heads up,” I caution her. “We’re about to trespass. But I know all the local cops. I think I can manage any charges

we may potentially face.”

She giggles nervously.

“Kidding,” I assure her. “Well, mostly.”

She slips into a pair of sneakers. There’s a pair of strappy sandals in the trunk of her car, and I imagine her in those. They would certainly alter the impression of the skirt, and her legs are simply sensational. But given that some climbing is in our plans and we might need to make a quick exit, I prefer her in the sneakers. They’re cute anyway.

“I think I should get you a pair of bobby socks,” I whisper, already planning for another time.

I pat her playfully on the rump.

“Do that again,” she warns, “and we’ll never leave this house.”

My eyebrows nearly lift off my face. I weigh her proposal.

“We better leave before I take you up on your offer,” I decide.

She picks up her purse and keys.

“What are those for?” I ask.

“I’m parked behind you,” she informs. “I figured we could take my car.”

“We’re walking,” I declare. “Sure, we had cars back then, but this was our mode. We hoofed it. First stop, the park.”

The town of Roseland is so small that owning a car seems somewhat redundant. We reach the end of our street and onto the access road that leads us to Main Street.

The park is right across the street. The fall sky is splotchy, but it’s clear around the moon.

“Look at that,” I marvel.

We halt and gaze upward. It’s a three-quarter moon, bright and almost perfectly round, except for the chunk missing.

“It always reminds me of a dime,” I say. “Except during a new moon, when it reminds me of a quarter.”

She turns to me and grins.

“Money, huh?” she asks.

“I am a Ferguson, after all,” I respond.

I squeeze her hand, and we set out on the paved path that winds around the entire park.

“This is new,” I say. “It used to be gravel.”

The trees whisper as a breeze pushes through. The air is crisp. We would need jackets if we were doing this a week or two later. I’m still in my dinner blazer, so I should be warm enough. I anticipate that we’ll be generating some heat of our own soon.

“So, we used to come here with alcohol we’d pilfered from one household or another,” I admit. “As you might expect, my house was never short of supply.”

“Is that where you picked up the habit?” she asks.

Her comment catches me off guard.

“I apologize,” she says. “That didn’t come out right.”

“It’s okay,” I assure her. “That’s bound to happen for a while. I didn’t change overnight. It’s going to take some time for the rumors to catch up.”

“I am so sorry,” she repeats. “I’ll try that again. Were your parents part of the cocktail party generation?” she asks.

“Yeah,” I respond, trying to ignore the sting her remark caused.

Knowing Roseland as I do, being part of its fabric, means her knowledge about me implies that people know we’re associating. I need to talk to my boss about us tomorrow, or we might both be out of a job.

I carry on, “We have a bit of everything here in Roseland. We kind of kept the tradition of dinner parties alive. Nothing fancy, of course. But sitting down at the dinner table is considered important here.”

“That’s nice,” she says. “I like that.”

“So, I’ve laid bare all about me,” I say. “What about you? Are you a California girl, or did you just end up there after school?”

“I grew up in Watsonville,” she reveals. “Just south of San Jose. It’s between Monterey and San Jose.”

“Home to my favorite writer,” I say.

“Yeah, it’s beautiful,” she agrees. “It’s a farming town. But people don’t connect there the way they do here. I didn’t have that sense of community that I’ve found here.”

“Well, we’re really a small town,” I clarify.

“Watsonville is sprawling,” she counters. “I love it here. It does remind me somewhat of San Jose. We’re nestled in a valley, so there are mountains. Obviously, they’re not as towering as the Cascades.”

An affectionate urge sweeps over me, so I pause our walk to kiss her. It’s always like that with her; I’m overcome with affection and simply need to taste her lips.

“I thought for a while I was going to go to law school,” she shares. “But when this opportunity came up, I realized I was just looking for the next phase in life.”

“Law school or Roseland,” I muse.

“I didn’t really desire to be a lawyer,” she admits.

“You enjoy being a teacher?” I inquire.

“Here I do,” she affirms. “Not to tattle, but Kirby has been the sole irritant. How about you? Do you enjoy it?”

“Absolutely,” I confirm. “I had forgotten how much I adore sports. I think my dissatisfaction these past few years stems from needing that intense physical challenge.”

“Do you now?” she teases suggestively.

“You’re going to tempt me into having wild passionate sex with you outdoors, aren’t you?” I retort playfully. “Next stop, Roseland High.”

Taking her hand, I stride purposefully towards the school.

“Are we really going to the school to...you know?” she queries.

Halting abruptly, she lightly bumps into me.

“Shhh,” I whisper, placing a finger against my lips. “People will hear. Sound doesn’t have to travel far in Roseland before someone overhears. Next thing you know, it’s ‘did you hear what she said?’”

“But are we?” she presses, whispering this time.

“I don’t know,” I answer coyly as we resume walking. “Let’s see how the night unfolds.”

A thrill rushes through me, and I can’t help smirking. The mere idea of us making love under the stars on a well-kept lawn, either here or at the school, has lodged in my mind. If not tonight, it’s definitely on my to-do list.

“But the other two,” she insists, “they were caught on camera.”

I halt again, realizing we’re almost there.

“Silly,” I tease. “We’re not planning on making love by the school. I’m just showing you around.”

“To the school?” she challenges. “For no reason?”

“To the bleachers specifically,” I explain, grinning. “Perhaps even beneath the bleachers, where we’ll be out of camera view. And remember, just like in high school, don’t do anything you don’t want to.”

“Oh, I want to,” she responds, her voice heavy with intent. “I’m just asking these questions to ensure you’ve thought this through.”

“I see,” I half sing. “So, you’re saying you’re all in?”

“Oh, absolutely,” she murmurs, kissing me so passionately that I nearly melt on the sidewalk.

She knows as well as I do where the bleachers are. As we approach, the motion-sensitive security lights flicker on, dousing us in a stark white glow.

“We’re totally on camera now,” I comment.

“We’re just touring the school grounds,” she giggles in response.

“You’re leading me into temptation,” I jest.

A playful urge to nudge her into the grass flutters in my mind.

The bleachers loom just a few yards away. Simultaneously, we break into a saunter. We clamber boisterously up to the lowest level and climb to the highest point, tucked in the furthest corner. I scan the field, absorbing the view that spectators enjoy during a game—the view my parents had when they attended every single home match.

“Nice,” she remarks, cuddling against me.

I encircle her with my arm, savoring the way she fits into my embrace. My mind turns to logistics, considering the depth of the steps where spectators rest their feet—whether they could conceal a pair like us. I should know this. It’s not my intention to recall another woman while I’m with Dawn. I’ve done so before, but it’s challenging not to think of my high school girlfriend now that I’m back at the school so frequently.

If it were summer, I’d be unabashedly making a move on her. But even on the well-maintained wooden bleachers, the surface is hard and cold. I consider declining, but she takes my hand.

“Come,” she breathes.

We descend the edge of the bleachers, hopefully disappearing from the camera’s view as we navigate between this set and the next. Underneath, she guides me to lean against a support and tenderly kisses me. I’m instantly aroused. Guiding her hand, I show her. She purrs against my lips, revealing her tantalizingly sinful side.

“You know,” I manage between her kisses, “I pegged you as a shy, sweet, innocent woman.”

Her laugh is tinged with a touch of mischief.

“Hello,” I tease.

“I am sweet and innocent,” she counters.

“Good to know,” I reply before flipping her around.

My hand ventures beneath the hem of her skirt, appreciating the smoothness of her thigh. I guide her legs apart with my own.

“Ooh,” she croons, “Assertive.”

“Indeed,” I affirm.

“Domineering,” she purrs.

I trail my fingers between her thighs. Her panties are damp. I slip a finger inside her, causing her to arch against the post. My tongue darts into her mouth, exploring with a feverish intensity. I apply pressure to her wetness, focusing on her most sensitive area, as I stroke her flushed flesh with my fingers.

Dawn sags against me, her forehead rolling against my chest as she braces herself with her hands. She starts to nod, as if my touch is hitting all the right spots. She gyrates against me with slow, lascivious movements. As I quicken my strokes, I don't relent. She nips at my shirt—a habit I've noted she enjoys—presumably to stifle her cries. It works, but only to a certain extent. Finally, I feel her quivering uncontrollably.

I'd love nothing more than to become more intimate, but we're at our limit, particularly considering my father's tale. I refuse to be run out of town due to rumors, although I suspect I would elope anywhere with this woman. She's that precious to me.

As she gradually comes to, rousing from her blissful reverie, I rearrange her skirt. She blinks exaggeratedly, attempting to shake off the lingering pleasure so we can proceed.

“Are you okay?” I tease gently.

“Better than okay,” she retorts, punctuating her words with a swift kiss.

She scrutinizes me, and the same thought settles over us.

“We should head home,” I propose. “It’s late, and we’re not exactly youngsters anymore.”

“Ah!” she protests. “Speak for yourself.”

I crouch to meet her gaze.

“When was the last time you stayed out this late?” I question. “Especially on a work night?”

Her grin is devilish. I feel somewhat taken aback and vulnerable. Is this a common occurrence for her?

“This is new for you, isn’t it?” I query cautiously.

“Absolutely,” she smiles. “You’re the one lamenting about how terrible it is to get up the next day after a late night. Sounds like you’re the expert.”

“Ouch,” I retort, swatting her splendid *derrière*. “Smarty pants.”

Hand in hand, we stroll across Roseland’s Main Street. The town is as quiet as if it’s been packed away for the night.

“It’s almost surreal,” she comments. “Like a movie set.”

“It’s the spitting image of how it was when I was a kid, and when my dad was a kid,” I reflect. “Not much has changed. And I think I prefer it that way.”

Despite her living just one street away, I offer to trail behind her to her house.

“Don’t be ridiculous,” she dismisses with an enchanting smile.

“I just worry about you,” I confess sincerely.

I didn’t anticipate feeling so deeply, so quickly. Only a short while ago, bitterness consumed me. Now, my life bears no resemblance to what it was before Laurel.

“Okay,” I concede, “then at least text me when you’re home, inside with the door locked.”

“Aye, aye, captain,” she teases.

I chuckle, enamored with her witty humor.

“If you continue this behavior, you might earn yourself a detention,” I pretend to threaten.

“Ooh,” she retorts. “There you go again with the teacher role-play.”

“Okay, let’s pause there,” I chuckle. “We ought to maintain some professional boundaries.”

She collects her sweats, folding them neatly instead of simply tossing them into the car.

“OCD,” I jest. “A girl after my own heart.”

Turning towards me, she gazes into my eyes with an intense longing before getting into the car. The picture-perfect night serves as an extraordinary backdrop behind her. Without a doubt, this has been one of the best nights of my life.

“You have no idea,” she murmurs, leaning in to plant a soft goodnight kiss.

DAWN

Waking up hurts, but as I recall why I'm in this state, I can't help but burst into laughter. In fact, I'm laughing so hard it's making it difficult to sit up. I'm stiff. Not yet thirty, and I suddenly feel aged. How I wish Kyle were in bed with me, sharing this moment. Given our early morning meeting with the principal, I must power through my aches and get moving.

"Morning," I text him, then hop into the shower.

I contemplate doing something some might deem foolish: sending a risqué picture of myself to Kyle. It's nothing too scandalous - just a snapshot of my bare foot under the stream of the showerhead.

"You have my attention," he responds immediately. "My full, undivided attention."

Chuckling, quite pleased with myself, I continue my shower while mentally assembling my outfit for the day. Despite feeling like I have a hangover, though I don't, I'm in high spirits and eager to get to school.

It's Friday, and faculty are permitted to wear jeans to work. Although I usually oppose dressing too casually, I decide to break my personal rule just this once, hoping to amuse the students. I opt for my best pair of jeans, lace-up paddock-style boots, and a soft, powder-pink sweater. For Kyle, I put in a bit more effort, blow-drying and straightening my hair, applying makeup, and adding a touch of perfume. Lunch and messenger bag in hand, I lock up and head to school.

The picturesque perfection of my street, amplified by my rose-tinted perspective, makes me feel like I'm in a movie. On my way to school, I take a detour down Main Street to grab three to-go coffees - one for the principal, one for Kyle, and one for myself. At the café, I run into Esmé.

"Good morning, sunshine," she greets me. "You look adorable. What can I get you?"

"I'll take one coffee my way, and if you know how Principal Davidson and Kyle like theirs, one of each. Otherwise, two coffees with cream and sugar, please."

"I actually know how they take their coffees. Three coming right up," she says.

In a blink, my order is ready. She arranges the paper cups, each marked with a name, in a tray and hands it to me with a smile.

I offer her my card, but she shakes her head. "Oh no, teachers, principals, and even coaches get their coffees on the house."

"Did you hear? Kyle's got a permanent position," I mention.

"Yep," she nods. "On one hand, it makes sense - he was a terrific football star. But on the other hand, it has us wondering what they were thinking."

She smiles and shakes her head. I know she's merely engaging in her usual chit-chat, but her teasing at Kyle's expense cuts me to the core. I feel incredibly protective. I try to keep my reaction under control, but I worry she might sense it. I manage a polite smile.

"Thanks for the coffee," I say. "I should get going."

"You should know how Kyle likes his coffee by now," she comments casually.

I'm thrown off. Sure, we had countless chats when I first moved here. I enjoyed hearing local gossip, which felt more like story time than learning the realities about people I might grow to love.

“Pardon?” I say, giving her a sharp look before I can stop myself.

I’m on edge, and I fear it’s evident on my face.

“You two are dating,” she points out.

“Sorry, Esmé, but I’m not one for small talk,” I reply, leaving a ten-dollar bill on the counter. “Have a great day.”

My mind races as I head to school. My morning started off perfectly, and now this. I take deep breaths, reminding myself that if my mood could plummet so quickly, it could also rebound. I stop at my classroom first.

“Are we meeting Dr. Davidson?” I text Kyle.

“Yes,” he replies. “I’m already in his office.”

So, I join them.

“Good morning,” I greet them, making my way into the principal’s office.

Kyle accepts the coffee from me.

“How thoughtful,” he comments.

“Esmé at the café knows everyone’s order,” I explain.

“She should,” Dr. Davidson says, “considering how frequently I visit. Please, take a seat.”

I sit, and Kyle takes the seat beside me.

“I believe I know what this is about,” the principal starts, “but I’d like to hear it from you.”

Kyle glances at me before speaking.

“Out of respect for you, we thought it best to inform you that we’ve been seeing each other,” he says. “It wasn’t planned. It just happened. And it’s been meaningful enough that we wanted to discuss it with you. If school policy prohibits us from dating, I’ll respect that. But it would mean I can’t accept the position, sir.”

“Dawn?” Dr. Davidson turns to me.

I'm taken aback by the fact that Kyle would prioritize our fledgling relationship over his job. Any previous doubts, all those moments when I wondered why he hadn't called, are instantly put to rest.

"I concur with Kyle; none of this was intended to disrespect you, especially considering the people we were hired to replace," I say.

"Without delving into too many details," Dr. Davidson begins, struggling to suppress a smile, "they were, let's say, rather blatant. If you two can keep your relationship discreet, I have no objections. This is a small town; these situations are tough to avoid. I don't want to witness any of it at school, and I certainly don't want to hear stories from the students. If that occurs, we'll need to revisit the situation. Am I clear?"

"Understood," Kyle responds.

"I advocated for you," he chuckles. "I'd like you to stay at this school for a while."

"Thank you again for the opportunity," Kyle says humbly. "I'm aware you put your reputation on the line for me, which is why we didn't want to proceed another day without informing you."

"I appreciate your honesty more than you realize," he says. "I didn't get to my position without being able to read people. Just make sure I don't end up seeing any video footage of you two."

Kyle and I burst into laughter.

"My father has seen that video," Kyle says.

"Videos, with an 's'," Dr. Davidson corrects with a mischievous arch of his brow. "Dawn, thank you for the coffee. You may go now."

I manage to suppress my excitement as we leave the office. There are countless reasons for my elation, the most significant being that Kyle feels the same way about me as I do about him. Now would be the ideal time to hold his hand, if we weren't at work.

“Are we still having dinner at your place or mine?” he asks, a sparkle in his eye.

“Yes,” I reply, winking at him.

“We need to behave,” he says, “despite how much I want to misbehave.”

That was the last I saw of him for the remainder of the school day. I half-expected to bump into him at lunch, but not seeing him made our upcoming evening together feel even more special. I spend the day planning. It'd likely be better at my place since I have actual furniture. I browse online to see what the local grocery store offers in terms of ready-made meals. I'm thrilled—their hot food counter is exceptional.

“I'm going to develop a cholesterol problem living here,” I mutter to myself.

As the end of the day approaches, my anticipation for the evening grows. It feels like I'm about to attend a concert or embark on a spontaneous trip. I'm excited to have dinner with Kyle and Laurel. I decide to get next week's planning done this afternoon, deviating from my usual Saturday morning routine, to make room for my burgeoning social life. Just as I'm about to leave, Kirby knocks on my door, causing me to tense up.

“May I come in?” he asks, which immediately surprises me.

“Yes, of course,” I reply.

I have a chair beside my desk for student consultations.

“I wanted to apologize for my previous behavior,” he says. “I had a chat with Coach.”

I smile inwardly, feeling a warm glow. Not just because of the remarkable change in this young man, but because Kyle intervened on both my and Kirby's behalf.

“I'm planning to miss one day of practice next week to make up for the one I should have skipped earlier.”

I nod in acknowledgment.

“And I’m going to rewrite the paper,” he continues, “whether it affects my grade or not.”

“Excellent,” I respond. “I’m looking forward to reading it. Having this version of Kirby in class would be a pleasure.”

However, he doesn’t immediately rise to leave.

“Is there something else?” I inquire.

“Well, about you and Coach,” he starts hesitantly, “You’re familiar with him, right?”

“Yes,” I say, realizing that, even without any overt displays of affection at school, the students are already aware.

“I’m worried about him,” Kirby admits. “He really spoke to me in a meaningful way and changed my perspective.”

“I can see that,” I reply.

“But in P.E.,” he continues, “it was like he wasn’t even there. I couldn’t tell if he was upset or angry. It looked like a mixture of both. We saw him drive away during lunch. He wasn’t himself during class, and he didn’t even show up for practice. I had to run the drills.”

Warning bells go off in my mind. I wonder if something happened to Laurel. Trying to maintain my composure, I resolve to investigate as soon as Kirby leaves.

“Thank you for letting me know,” I say. “I’ll ask my colleagues if they have any information. Don’t worry. We all experience minor incidents that upset us, but they pass.”

“Enjoy your weekend,” he says.

“Yes, see you on Monday,” I reply.

Packing up my things, I realize I walked to school, so I have to hustle across town, arms full, just to reach my car at home. I text Kyle, but receive no response. I call, but it goes straight to voicemail. I drive past his house, and he’s not there. Next, I try his parents’ house using the address I found, but it seems empty—if anyone’s home, they’ve hidden their cars in the garage.

I'm stumped. I pass by the café, but see no familiar vehicles—not that I remember what his parents were driving the previous night. He knows I'm expecting to hear from him, and he promised he wouldn't stand me up again. I decide to trust him.

I head over to the grocery store, pick up dinner and breakfast items, and even throw in a couple of picnic items—just in case we spend extended time together. While I have fresh vegetables and other ingredients to cook and mash for Laurel, I grab a few jars of baby food just in case. I'm prepared. David Dye isn't at the store, or I'm certain he'd be saying hello by now. Once home, I store everything away.

I sit, alone.

Under different circumstances, I might head over to the café—if Esmé were still there, she'd tell me what she knew. However, I was brusque with her earlier, and now I regret it. Usually, at this hour, I'd exercise and eat something, but tonight I thought I had a date. I don't know whether to feel worried, hurt, or angry. I get in the car one more time and make a sweep of Old Town, readying myself to wait for an explanation if he isn't around.

I'm not sure how I missed it earlier, or if it was even there, but I notice Kyle's car parked in the common lot for the local shops. I scan the storefronts, trying to gauge where he might be among them. The café sits at one end, with a barber, a hair salon, a thrift shop, and a realtor between us. Then, a few other businesses, including a karate dojo. At the other end of the ancient boardwalk, a relic of the town's Old West history, sits the Brick—the bar where Kyle earned his infamous reputation.

Despite my instincts urging me to turn away, a part of me is drawn towards it. This morning, I defended Kyle against Esmé's doubts, but now I feel foolish. If the rumors about him hold any truth, hoping for a complete and instant transformation was probably naïve. I try calling him again, only for his phone to go to voicemail. I feel like a fool.

Entering the Brick, I'm grateful at least to be appropriately dressed. The place is as dark as a cavern, with a lanky man

behind the counter who, I suspect, is the only other sober individual here besides me. Kyle is there, occupying what I understand to be his usual spot at the bar. A nearly flat beer sits untouched before him, and a wave of unease sweeps over me. The bartender, likely aware of who I am due to town gossip, meets my gaze.

Finally, Kyle looks my way. I recognize him, yet he's different—so far removed from the man I declared to my boss that I was seeing. Suddenly, I understand Esmé's skepticism and attitude towards Kyle's employment. This is the Kyle she knows.

And a Kyle I've never met.

KYLE

I t's clear she's hurt, and it's killing me. The moment I believed there was a chance for love and a family, I was all in. I abandoned the very bar stool I now occupy. I overhear their chatter, the inevitable predictions that I'd return. And they were right. Clenching a letter received today, I suppress a surge of emotion.

The phone call came at noon from my mother, her voice ringing with anticipation about the mail delivery. She talked incessantly about throwing another celebration that evening. Even my father left his golf game to fetch prime rib from the butcher, that's how certain they were that Laurel would officially become the newest Ferguson. The town, it seems, had been right all along. My feelings are a muddled mess—nothing good in there.

“He hasn't had a drink yet,” Mike the bartender remarks.

“I think you know my mother,” I retort, my tone harsh. “And she isn't her.”

I push the letter in her direction.

“Read it,” I order.

“Results from the Kinship Test confirm that you-” she starts but I interrupt.

“Not out loud, idiot,” I snap.

My words echo the harsh tones of my father after a few drinks, yet I'm stone-cold sober. Dawn sets the letter on the bar, blinking rapidly against the onset of tears. Her once

radiant face is marred by sorrow. She retreats slowly from the bar.

“You’re the idiot,” Mike retorts.

“Why don’t you shut up,” I growl.

Once I’m sure she’s gone, I motion towards the untouched beer.

“Take this,” I say dismissively, laying a hundred-dollar bill on the counter.

“It was just the one,” he protests.

“Just take it,” I insist.

Money is no longer an issue for me. My rent is covered for the next six months. I return home to an empty house—no baby, no beautiful woman, and no living room furniture. Opening the refrigerator reveals nothing appealing, though I do have coffee. I might drink some of that. Locking the front door, I collapse onto my bed and give into my sobs.

The weekend stretches on, every moment a new agony. I leave Laurel with my mother, unable to be around her without breaking down. I don’t know what’s worse for her—my sudden absence or my current state. My communication with my mother is limited to phone calls; I don’t have the courage to face my father. Like me, he might have slipped back into old habits. His I-told-you-so criticism is something I can’t handle right now.

It doesn’t make sense. Laurel is six months old, placing her conception around the time I was in Aspen. Her mother and I spent that entire weekend in a haze, but I’m certain I was the one with her. And Laurel looks exactly like me. My mother even compared Laurel to my baby pictures, and aside from the cutesy clothes she dresses Laurel in, we could pass for the same child. Despite the tests asserting that we’re not related, I resist the urge to drown my sorrows in alcohol, despite the tormenting pain. It’s because of her, I suppose. I’ve disappointed everyone in my life and sent Dawn packing, but I won’t drink myself into oblivion for the sake of the baby.

Sometime during the night, I succumb to sleep, only to awaken in my clothes to the sound of a lawnmower. I lift my head to confirm it's my lawn getting mowed. The houses here are cozily clustered, enabling me to catch the neighbors' chatter; thus, I'm careful with my words. However, given the acoustics and the fact I don't have a lawn service, I'm not certain it's my lawn getting trimmed. I jump to my feet to check.

It's Kirby. Arriving in a pickup truck, he's now meticulously tending to the grass. A weed-eater is also in sight. The boys were over when I moved in, helping me spruce up the yard. Maybe Kirby's confused. I stand at the door, waiting for him to notice my disheveled appearance.

"What's happening?" I manage to ask, keeping my tone even.

"Mowing your lawn," he replies.

"Why?" I inquire.

"Because I need to," he states. "And because you need me to."

His gaze is piercing, a warning shot that puts me on alert.

"Why did you skip practice yesterday?" he probes.

"I had personal stuff," I confess.

"Didn't you advise me that practice was a way out of problems?" he retorts.

"I did," I concede.

Strangely, his challenge doesn't enrage me; it provides a sense of relief. Yesterday, I'd exploded and inflicted damage. Now, after a night's sleep and a lecture from a high schooler, my fury has abated. I'm even beginning to regret my outburst, albeit slightly.

Kirby pops his earbuds back in and continues his work. Closing my door, I succumb to tears again. But I use every ounce of my willpower to avoid Laurel and refrain from calling Dawn. Escaping into the sanctuary of Dawn's embrace would be the perfect solace right now. Yet, we need to get past

each other. I had confessed my feelings for her at the meeting, and she had excitedly flooded my phone with messages about dinner at home. That was all she desired, and I couldn't provide it.

This is for the best. Had we continued, one of us would have lost our job eventually. I plan on telling Dr. Davidson that I'm open to coaching but will pass on the teaching opportunity. My father mentioned a position at the bank, and I'm considering returning there. I can't risk bumping into Dawn constantly.

I neglect personal hygiene until Sunday night. I attempted to get food delivered from the Brick, but Mike, still angry with me, refused. Ordering from the café was my next move, though I'm certain Esmé can't resist spreading rumors about me. By Sunday night, I feel like I'm reverting to my previous self—out of shape, aging prematurely, much like before Laurel's arrival. I had vowed to myself that regardless of the test results, I would be her father. Now, I fear they'll share the results with her mother, who might snatch her away from me. My avoidance feels like swiftly ripping off a band-aid.

After a shower and shave, I retire to my freshly washed and dried bed, aiming for a decent sleep. But when Monday morning arrives, I just can't do it. I can't face work, so I call in sick. I feel like a coward. Still, I manage to get dressed, which signifies some improvement. I could be out furniture shopping, but instead, I sit on a folding chair in my empty living room, idly scrolling through my phone. As soon as the medical center opens, I withdraw from the parenting classes, getting redirected to voicemail.

"Hi, this is Kyle Ferguson," I begin. "This message is for Dr. Safran. I've received my paternity test results, and they're negative. So, I'm not a father. I was worried about whether I'd be a good dad, but it turns out I'm not a dad at all. So, I won't need those parenting classes anymore. Thanks for all the support. Take care."

I hoped quitting the classes would bring some relief, but unlike previous changes, this one doesn't. As I contemplate

grocery shopping, the sound of a key sliding into my door startles me. It's my mother, and fear grips me instantly.

"Where is the baby?" I demand anxiously. "Does dad have her?"

"No," she replies, her voice grave.

Panic surges through me. "Did they come and take her away?" I ask, barely holding myself together.

"Of course not," she retorts.

Tears spring to my eyes uncontrollably. Ignoring my state, she theatrically throws open the curtains, letting sunlight flood in. Pausing, she looks out the back window.

"When did you get those?" she asks.

"Get what?" I respond, my grief rendering me barely functional.

"The lawn furniture?" she inquires.

I rise and glance out the window. "I have no idea," I admit, puzzled by its presence. "Mom, where is the baby?"

"Your daughter is with Dawn," she states, her eyes reproaching me. "You shattered that poor woman's heart. I've had to care for the baby and comfort Dawn all weekend. Are you rested?"

I'm left speechless.

"I'll check out the back," she declares.

Looking again, I see a complete patio set. It's a bit dated but perfectly serviceable, appearing to have been power washed recently.

"I don't know if it was there before," I confess. "Honestly, I hadn't paid much attention to the backyard since the guys trimmed the bushes."

Waves of affection and love for Laurel wash over me. The scent of the baby lotion my mother uses, smelling like pure cuteness, stirs memories. I long for the feeling of her tiny head

resting against my cheek, serene with her small pacifier nestled in her mouth.

“I missed you this weekend,” I whisper, as though my words could magically reach her. “I missed you.”

“It’s nice,” my mother comments, softening a touch. “I’m sending over the family room furniture this afternoon. You’ll have a place to sit. I also have a card table and chairs from when your dad and I used to play bridge.”

“You don’t have to do that,” I protest.

“Yes, I do,” she retorts in her typical sharp manner. “Because Laurel needs a home with furniture, and she needs her daddy.”

Feeling desperate, I reply, “Stop saying that. I’m not her father.”

“You are, except you didn’t act like it this week,” she counters. “You don’t abandon your child just because you stub your toe. Get your head out of your behind and count your blessings. You’re going to apologize to the principal for your absence. Tell him some personal issues cropped up, but you’re ready to return.”

“I’m thinking of going back to the bank,” I suggest.

“You’re going back to school, even if I have to drag you by your ear,” she asserts.

I’m so taken aback by her forcefulness that I can only blink.

“That poor woman is crazy about you,” she adds.

“Mom,” I start, but words fail me.

Then, a realization hits me. “If Dawn has the baby, does that mean she didn’t go to school either?” I inquire.

“No, I need to pick Laurel up,” my mother answers. “Dawn’s watching her during her lunch hour. I thought I could come by and talk some sense into you.”

I glance at my watch. Is it noon already? My phone rings. It’s the medical center.

“Oh no,” I sigh to my mother, allowing my phone to continue ringing. “I think I’ve had enough of speeches. Not from this guy.”

But eventually, I take the call.

“Kyle Ferguson speaking,” I say, switching to my professional tone.

“Kyle, this is Dr. Safran,” he responds. “I’m reviewing your test results.”

“Yeah,” I interrupt him, “thanks again for everything. I’m not ready to discuss it. It’s a bit of a touchy subject.”

“Well, listen,” he continues, “I contacted the lab director. As a doctor, I couldn’t definitively tell you that the baby was yours without the test results, but honestly, I didn’t need a test. She’s the spitting image of you. Anyway, the letter was a mistake. The lab director mentioned an IT breach they’re investigating. You’ll need to call them—”

My heart lurches, and I interrupt him. “Wait,” I stammer, sinking into the folding chair. “What was that? Did you just say the letter was wrong? When did they discover this? Why didn’t they call?”

“I can’t answer that,” he replies calmly. “But I can tell you this: you are baby Laurel’s father.”

“I’m her father,” I echo.

The fact that I’d suspected this all along doesn’t change the sudden impact of his words. It doesn’t feel real.

“What?” my mother questions in the background.

I nod at her.

“I guess I won’t be quitting those parenting classes after all,” I chuckle, tears blurring my vision.

“Breathe,” Dr. Safran instructs lightly. “Take care.”

Collapsing into my hands, I sob. My mother rubs my back.

“I’m so sorry,” I murmur.

“You’ve been put through the wringer,” she consoles, her voice the same comforting lilt I’ve known my whole life.

“I’ve ruined my life because I couldn’t handle disappointment,” I confess. “I’m such a fool.”

“Kyle,” she states with a firm gentleness. “Think about how quickly people who love you came into your life when you allowed them. You can’t welcome them only in good times. Consider what you’d tell your players: stay humble in victory, and stand strong in defeat. You can’t behave poorly when things go wrong.”

Hearing my mother use such strong language is a shock.

“Mom,” I respond. “I love you. You’d make an excellent coach. But right now, I need to get dressed for work. And to kiss my daughter. My daughter.”

“Are you certain, son?” she inquires.

“You just told me I had to go to work,” I tease.

“But that was before,” she counters. “Can I accompany you? Because, well, I have to bring my granddaughter home.”

“Your granddaughter. Could you drive me? I just need to change my pants,” I negotiate.

I place a call to Dr. Davidson.

“This is Kyle Ferguson,” I begin. “Sir, I just received the all-clear from my doctor, and I’m calling to let you know I’ll be on my way to school shortly.”

After hanging up, I tell my mom, “We need to invite him over for dinner.”

My mother drives me to school, and for a moment, I feel like I’m fifteen again, albeit a more mature version of my teenage self. The bell rings, signaling the end of lunch and the start of classes. I dash through the front door, sprinting down the hallway to Dawn’s classroom. She’s holding Laurel, who reaches out her tiny arms to me as I approach.

“I’ll take my daughter,” I announce with a grin. “Her grandmother is waiting for her.”

Turning my back to the class, I mouth 'I love you' to Dawn.

DAWN

Monday proved to be the most Monday-esque of all Mondays throughout my career. It was the most challenging day for me to endure. Dr. Davidson's rule about keeping personal relationships out of the classroom wasn't solely for the students' benefit; it was for mine, too. Trying to keep it together while feeling shattered inside was difficult. I'd spent the entire weekend longing for a man who thought he could waltz into my classroom with a smile and a whispered "I love you," after the way he'd treated me during our difficult moments.

Kyle sent a text asking to make up for missing our Friday date. Not only did I decline his invitation, but I also put an end to our relationship.

"Please don't text me again," I replied. "Let's keep things professional at work."

I hadn't planned on sending such a text, but once it was sent, there was no denying my feelings. Falling into an affair with a colleague, especially one with so much baggage, was a mistake. The entire experience, coupled with the sudden onset of cold weather, tarnished the charm of Roseland. The quaint town, which once symbolized my future, now felt isolating. I questioned whether there was anything here for me after all, especially since I had allowed Kyle to become my entire world.

Luckily, I've avoided running into Kyle outside of school. I've returned to my routine café visits, though Esmé, once my confidant, has been holding a grudge. She remains civil but

distant, unlike before I confronted her. Trish, Kyle's mother, brings baby Laurel in quite often. I sense, or perhaps just imagine, her desire to speak to me. Eventually, she does approach my table.

"Have a seat," I invite politely.

"Thank you," she responds, her voice filled with emotion. "I didn't want to intrude, but I think I've been doing that all his life."

"You're the one with the baby, not him," I note.

"He's at an away game," she explains.

"Oh, right," I reply, vaguely remembering the sports schedule. The faculty and staff receive alerts and updates about extracurricular events.

"He'll return tonight. He's dedicated to being Laurel's father. He's trying to do right by her, but he reproaches himself daily for how he handled things," she confides.

"With all due respect," I interject, "talking to you won't mend my relationship with him. You, Laurel, and I spent that weekend together after the state's mishap. He couldn't face her. I'm not thrilled with how he manages adversity."

"I'm not proud of how he handled that either," she admits. "I scolded him. Told him that parents are parents, no matter the circumstances. He said it was too painful and that he needed the weekend."

"You can't run interference for him all his life," I caution.

"Actually, I can," she retorts. "I know when to step back. I see how much better Kyle is when he stands on his own."

"But I'm not intervening just for his benefit or my granddaughter's," she confesses. "I've seen you around town, as heartbroken as he is. I couldn't hold my peace today."

I remain silent. These answers, particularly delivered via third party, don't sit well with me. I haven't moved on from him to the point where I don't lie awake in bed, missing the wonderful moments we shared. And when I look at the baby, who seems to grow each second, my maternal instincts stir.

She's an exquisite little girl, and I'd love nothing more than to spend time with Trish and Laurel, indulging in 'girl stuff'.

"Well, it seems my visit here has done more harm than good," she sighs.

"It's as much on me as it is on him that things didn't work out," I confess. "We dove headfirst into a relationship that sparked instantly. Things spiraled out of control and progressed too rapidly. But we couldn't help it. In retrospect, it was a fleeting period. Too short a time for anything substantial to develop. For him to be declaring his love for me."

"It didn't seem that way to me," she retorts thoughtfully. "Remember, dear, I was with you that weekend. Regardless of whether it's here in Roseland or elsewhere, do you genuinely believe you'll find something comparable anytime soon?"

She gives my hand a reassuring pat and stands up. She waves at Laurel, who mimics her.

"Say bye-bye," she instructs the baby, who grins back at her. "Have a good day, dear."

That moment affects me. Trish Ferguson leaves me seated, lost in thought. Esmé swings by with a coffee pot.

"Refill?" she asks.

"No, just the bill, please. And thank you, Esmé, for your excellent service," I respond.

"Mrs. Ferguson took care of your bill," she informs me with a wink.

I reflexively check my phone. Roseland High wins. A slow, bittersweet wave of nostalgia washes over me. Images of an irresistibly attractive Kyle, the baby, and me quietly celebrating the victory at his place or mine play in my head. I find myself pondering Trish's question. Can I find in someone else what I've experienced with Kyle? Do I want to?

The truth is, I expected him to release his anger, but I permit mine to linger. I visit the grocery store and purchase a bouquet of flowers before heading home. He likely has furniture by now, considering it's been a couple of weeks since

we last spoke. Otherwise, I'd vacuum in case I decide to invite him over. I treat myself to a bath and tend to parts of me I've neglected during my self-imposed melancholy. It strikes me that I should at least know his plans before I dress up, because that's my intention. I must reach out to his mother and reveal my intentions. So, I make the call.

"Hello," I begin. "Mrs. Ferguson? Trish?"

"Trish," she acknowledges. "Yes?"

"It's Dawn Moring," I say, although I know she recognizes me. "I heard the team won."

"They sure did," she responds cheerily.

"I understand Kyle's returning tonight," I mention. "I was thinking of surprising him."

"I see," she replies. "I could likely assist with that if you don't mind me stepping in."

It's a friendly jibe, and I return it with equal humor.

"No, you're quite adept at it, so I figured you were the person to ask," I respond with a laugh.

She laughs in return.

"Smarty pants," she teases. "He's just outside of town now. I reckon he'll pick up Laurel and be back at his house within the next hour and a half."

"Perfect," I say, my mind beginning to assemble the pieces. "Oh, and remember, I want this to be a surprise."

"Understood," she assures me.

It's chilly outside today, and the only non-business attire pants I have are yoga pants and jeans. I know he prefers me in a dress, but turning up at his doorstep in one might appear desperate.

He could still reject me in jeans, so I opt for the dress. I have a charming cocktail dress—dubbed the 'Temptress' in the catalog—a halter cut, baring the shoulders, with a turtleneck. To ward off the cold—my Californian roots are still

with me—I pair it with a leather bomber jacket and spiky-heeled ankle boots.

As I dress, I send up silent prayers. He professed his love for me. I recall feeling in love with him the morning before that disastrous letter arrived. And then there's what his mother said. I have to trust that extending an olive branch shouldn't be as terrifying as it seems. Just in case, I pack an overnight bag and stash it in my car trunk. After a final self-check in the mirror and a glance at the clock, it's time. I drive over to his house, just one street over. As his mother predicted, he's home; his car is parked in the driveway.

Fear grips me. He reacted poorly, as did I, and I am left nursing regrets. I park behind his car, get out, clutching the bouquet I bought for him, and my stomach somersaults. Before I can knock, he opens the door.

He looks stunning. He's dressed in a crisp white shirt and a black blazer. I glance beyond him and notice his table is set, the fireplace aglow with a hearty blaze.

“So, I heard you guys won. These are for you,” I manage to say, handing him the flowers. “It seems you're expecting someone.”

I notice his furniture—it seems almost brand new.

“It looks fantastic,” I compliment.

He gazes at me as if waiting for me to piece something together. The conflicting emotions of joy and pain swirl within me. I long to reach out and draw him close, but Laurel isn't around. He's dressed up, and everything looks so inviting.

And then it strikes me.

“Did your mother...?” I begin but don't finish.

He nods in affirmation.

“I was planning to surprise you,” I admit.

“That's what inspired me,” he confesses. “Besides, you should know better than to trust anyone in Roseland with a secret.”

Kyle seizes me in a passionate kiss. He presses his lips to mine, a gesture I know is meant to reconnect us. I sway against his embrace, enlivened by his touch. I feel as though I've been famished. His tongue dances leisurely in my mouth, claiming me utterly. A faint moan escapes my lips as desire pools between my legs.

"I know we have things to say," he whispers.

"Later," I rasp.

With effortless grace, he scoops me up, supporting my back and the crook of my knees. We move as one, in perfect sync. My arms wind around his neck. He carries me to the front door and locks it.

"I'm the only one with the key to that," he grins, settling on the couch with me straddling his lap. "You look stunning."

His hands glide over my thighs, my hips. My dress hikes up mid-thigh. His fingers stroke me, slowly venturing toward the inner folds of my legs.

"You look rather dashing yourself," I purr, arching against him and parting my knees.

I tilt my head back, baring my neck. He descends upon it, peppering it with light, teasing kisses. His fingers find me, slick and aroused. He delves a finger in, then another. Breaking away from my neck, he claims my lips in a fervent kiss. He struggles to remove his jacket without breaking our kiss, and I fumble blindly to assist.

A chuckle escapes us as we unsuccessfully attempt to divest him of his jacket. Finally, I slide off his lap. He rises, smoothly discards his jacket, and captures me once more. He reclines on the couch, and I sprawl on top of him.

"You're so comfortable," I whisper.

He brushes my hair away from my face, studying me.

"I missed you like mad," he admits softly. "I messed up, for sure. I thought I could slip back into the persona of a man shirking his responsibilities, but I was wrong. That was never the easy way."

“I did the same thing,” I confess. “It took me a while to realize it. But I fell back into my old black-and-white thinking—believing something is either right or wrong. But people aren’t papers to be graded.”

“No,” he agrees. “And you did open the door for Kirby to try again. I don’t want to assume that option will always be there, but I hope you’d allow me to try again.”

“I would like that,” I tell him, my heart brimming with love and affection.

Guiding his hand, I lead him before the fireplace. I recline there, hitching my dress off to reveal a set of black lace underwear.

“My God,” he murmurs, shaking his head in disbelief.

He unbuttons his crisp white shirt, contrasting beautifully against his sun-kissed chest. He steps out of his pants, revealing an even more chiseled physique.

“You’re a beautiful man,” I tell him, my voice laden with emotion.

He hovers over me, supported by his forearm, until all I see is his handsome face.

“I love you,” he whispers once more, leaning down to share another kiss.

I stop him. He looks at me, confusion flickering in his eyes.

“I love you,” I say, my voice steady. “I truly do.”

His smile blooms, warm and bright, before his mouth captures mine. He spreads my knees wider with his own, and he slides into me. For a couple of weeks, I believed I would never know this profound intimacy again. The feel of him inside me is such a rush that I climax after only a few thrusts. His depth within me provokes a burst of sensations.

It becomes a blur of how often we fuel our passion, only to let it simmer; stoke our desire, then allow it to cool. I lose all sense of time and space, though only an hour has passed. We

lay on his rug, the fire dwindling to low flames and glowing embers. We touch hands, our fingertips playfully exploring.

“You know what I want to do?” he murmurs.

“What?” I respond, our gazes locked in mutual adoration.

“I want to get dressed, go pick up that baby,” he says, his voice confident. “And then go tell my parents that we’re engaged.”

His words ring clearly until my brain stumbles over the last part. I do a double-take. He bursts into laughter.

“Will you marry me, Miss Moring?” he asks, his voice earnest. “It doesn’t have to be now. But someday. Will you wear my ring around town so people can gossip about us? And when the time is right, walk down the aisle towards me?”

“Can I adopt Laurel?” I ask, my voice pitching high because I am overwhelmed. “You know, when the time is right, after I wear your ring and everything?”

“I’m going to have to answer on her behalf because we’re still working on Da-da,” he chuckles. “But yes, that would be wonderful.”

“Okay,” I say, my voice steady. “Let’s go share the news.”

THE END

ALSO BY KATE LOVELACE

Thank you for reading *Football Star's Surprise Play*.

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Book 1 - Fireman's Secret Baby

The smoking hot fireman next door stole my heart and knocked me up.

It all started with a lie.

I got booted from art school and I'm too embarrassed to come clean about why.

So it's a godsend when my friend has an extra room for me.

But my bestie lives with his older brother - Michael - who is pure temptation.

Seeing that firefighter God casually strolling out of the bathroom every morning, in whatever hand towel he uses to dry himself would be the highlight of my day.

If we weren't practically family.

I push the images of his magnificent midriff out of my head until I can find my own place.

But then I make a crucial error. I ask him to pose for me.

Alone in my studio, his clothes come off, and I know I'm a goner.

Tensions ignite as he devours me with a fiery fervor that leaves my v-card thoroughly punched.

But when he pulls away for no reason, I just know this was a huge mistake.

My instinct says, run, never to speak to him again.

There's one small problem...now I'm late.

FIREMAN'S SECRET BABY

Fireman's Secret Baby

BREE

Usually closing my bedroom door would be an easy thing to do. But I have my arms full clutching tubes of paint like newly collected chicken eggs, some of which barely have their lids screwed on. Not unlike myself right now, it feels like my whole world is a messy art studio and I can't even think. That's why the dining room table is, or was, the perfect place for me to work. The room is spare and the surface of our eight seater dining room table is ample for me to create.

But no.

The powers that be determined that my painting there, when it isn't mealtime and no one needs the space otherwise, just isn't allowed. And in letting me know this, she—my mother—brought up every other unsettled topic in my dumpster fire of a life. So, I swept up the paints in a huff to *show her* and also to get her off my back.

My nose is running. My eyes are blind with tears, and if I drop a single tube of paint, my luck, it'll go everywhere. Not that tubes splatter, unless you, say, step on them. But these would. Because that's how life goes for me these days. these months, maybe these years.

I balance as I kick the door shut, harnessing my mental powers to will my precious cargo steady. I teeter and am about to not only fall over but drop everything. I quickly scan my options. It's either the floor or the bed. Because in order to keep from tumbling over with zero control, I have to dump the

paints. And I am not going to spring for having the oak floor refinished.

The bedspread must be sacrificed. My fluffy, pristinely white bedspread that survived dorm life without a single stain. I love this bedspread. But I drop my load of Blick Studio primary colors, wet brushes, and a well-used artist's palette in the middle of the mattress before I regain my balance.

"Damn it!" I holler.

"Watch your damn language!" my mother returns like a heckler from the peanut gallery.

"I'm not damning you," I call back in consummate frustration. "Oh, never the fuck mind." I fume inwardly.

I gingerly lift each tube like they're hair-trigger explosives and set them on my art table where I am supposed to be painting (the only place I'm apparently allowed to work). It's not the worst thing in the world that there are one or two intense drops on the duvet. I can get that out with rubbing alcohol, but I feel like the bedspread, like the day, like my life, is ruined. It will never be the same.

This is all it takes for me to reflect on a backpack's worth of recent events. I just got home from college, and at first, it was a major relief. But almost immediately Mom makes it clear I am in her way. I can't paint on the table because it's where we eat. Only, we don't. We order take-out and go to our separate corners.

And it's just the two of us. Always.

It was just the two of us before Oona came home. And now that my big sister is gone, it's just us once again, only this time, it's different.

Mom gets this major smile on her face whenever Oona is mentioned. She's away for three years, and somehow, manages to slip back into the perfect life. Her perfect man and a perfect baby. Me on the other hand, I just feel like I am some kind of hanger-on.

Of course, it doesn't help that my mother tells me to move all the time. Not out of the house, but out of her way. No

matter what I'm doing, invariably she needs to be where I am. I am the usurper of space.

I tried once to have the perfect life like Oona has now. Different, but still perfect. I had a scholarship at a top art school, working towards a career doing something I love. At a good school, in Chicago no less, a city I absolutely adore. I had Tyler, my smoking hot boyfriend. But I was an idiot and fate conspired to teach me a lesson.

So now I'm back home; a college dropout, and love, which I so desperately desire, further away than ever. I left school with my tail tucked between my legs and lied through my teeth to my mother about why. So, not only am I relegated to my bedroom like a tenth grader, I am delaying the inevitable with my mom. And I'm going to double-disappoint her when I tell her that not only did I not graduate art school, but I lied to her about why.

I take a sharp inhale and look at the pile of oil paints, one of which has lost its cap and is leaking onto my wooden desk. A desk that we inherited from my grandfather, who constructed it by hand when he was young.

"Goddamn it," I mutter.

I bound over and lift the tube off the unfinished wood surface as though I might actually catch the spill before it's too late. But of course, the damage is done. I stare down at the dark blue smudge, helpless, paralyzed with indecision about how to clean up yet another mess I've created. I grab an old T-shirt from my laundry bin and carefully pick off the glob, trying to keep the least amount of it from infecting any more of the precious surface. If my mother saw this, I'm sure it would launch her into another dimension of hatred.

Maybe alcohol would work, or some kind of denatured spirit. But would that damage the wood? Frustration wells up in my chest and erupts in a stifled whimper. This might just be the last straw.

It dawns on me that being an artist is a messy and dangerous profession. And I am not one who likes mess. In fact there was a time when my mother thought I might have a

serious OCD condition. I always arranged the labels in the pantry to face in the same direction, I was unnaturally excited by having several different kinds of dental floss, and most ironically, I was obsessed with cleanliness – my hands, the kitchen sink, the bathtub. The irony is not lost on me as I take in the mess around me.

I guess making art was a way for me to find balance. Sinking into the creative process gave me permission to express the other aspects of my personality. The world saw me as stiff and unfeeling, rigid perhaps. But inside, I was a seething mess, and that demanded to come out in some fashion or another.

A laugh escapes my lips as I try to grasp the string of disasters which have marked my life for the past six months. It's almost too much to process. And in the middle of it all is this sinking loneliness. This hopeless feeling that I'm just some garbage person who has no direction and no prospects in life.

Yes, I have friends here in my hometown. But there is something about the intimate touch from a boyfriend, a man, that fills me in ways other relationships can't.

I try to picture Tyler's face; to remember him in any kind of sentimental light, but I can't. His image is permanently destroyed. So now I just have this vacant feeling living in the pit of my stomach, with no identity, no recognizable source. I built an emotional structure for Tyler, and now that he's no longer a guest there, it just takes up space and draws attention to the fact that there's a void living inside me. A much-larger-than-I'd-like kind of void.

After all this, I am firm on the fact that sex ruins everything. That is, until I get a text from Lauren, my best friend ever. It's a picture.

“Living the dream!” she writes.

Dream is the operative word. She sent me a snapshot of herself at firefighter training, which is all I ever heard her talk about growing up. I was going to be an artist and she was going to rescue kittens from trees and give them to me.

She looks amazing. Not just because she is incredibly beautiful – Firefighter Barbie, I call her – but because there is a light in her eye that tells me she is doing what she is meant to be doing – against all better judgment and speculation.

But the *dream* part is standing behind her in the picture. Since the drama began with Tyler, a hell of my own making that I just couldn't stop from participating in, I have not felt anything hopeful.

Until I behold this gorgeous specimen standing behind my best friend. I have seen plenty of beautiful men, some of them as naked live models just a few feet away from me in my figure painting classes. But this man does something to me. And if the feeling is this powerful just seeing him candidly in the background of a picture, I can only imagine how it would be standing next to him.

Or lying beneath him.

I look around my room. My bedspread, no longer laid with tubes of my craft, is now folded strategically so that the stain won't re-stain something else. I lock the door and plop onto my bed as I daydream-stare at the picture on my cell phone. I feel like I know this firefighter god from somewhere, and then it hits me. This guy is practically my brother-in-law. He's Liam and Ethan's older brother, Michael. Ethan and Oona are engaged, and Liam and I are practically best friends.

Suddenly, I'm rushed with something – naughtiness – that I find someone so hot that I'm not even sure I should. But it's not just that he's hot, he's actually, maybe accessible. Accessible in the sense that he lives nearby. And we basically grew up together.

The Brothers Parker (Oona and I liked to call them) were always around when we were young. But Michael probably wouldn't even give me a second look. It's not like we ever hung out, given our age difference. Also, he's a grown man and probably has his shit together. And honestly, I don't.

He's ten years older AND a complete hottie. Totally out of my league. But the more I try to stop thinking about him, the more I do. And here I am, in bed, wishing he were with me

right now. Of all the random times to be slammed with a need for sex, like I even knew what that was about, having never actually experienced it. But when I am seized with these sweet, agonizing urges, it's like eternity tells me exactly what I need. The information is embedded in my cells, instinctively putting pictures in my mind of those perfect moments.

I can almost feel him, the hunky fireman who inadvertently photobombed Lauren's selfie. His huge muscular arms on either side of me, positioning himself perfectly as his warmth enters me right here in my bed. I don't know him, but I *know* him. I can practically see him, his rugged handsome face shining an adoring smile as he studies me. He strokes my hair, and grazes my lips as we breathe in unison. I am literally envisioning my first time and it's with Michael Parker.

In all the times I've been horny out of my mind, I could never get this far picturing Tyler and me. Physically, Tyler and Michael are both tens. But I couldn't bring myself to go as far with Tyler as I am craving to go with Michael right now.

My body is lit, my nipples hard and my panties wet, I'm giddy with sexual excitement. I find myself smiling at my cell phone like a fool, and all Lauren has texted is basically hello.

Suddenly, my daydream is lanced with an insistent knock on my door.

"Bree," my mother snaps at me.

"Just a sec," I bark, rolling off the bed.

I take a deep breath, but my anxiety is back on the rise. I take a breath, remembering I love my mother.

"Yes," I say, greeting her at the door like she's a salesperson at my apartment.

Her eyebrows flare.

"Can we, at least, talk like civilized adults?"

"What about my saying yes is uncivilized?" I say. "I can't seem to do anything right. Everything is a trigger with you."

"So, I'm the problem?" she responds defensively.

I take another deep breath.

“Is there something you came to my room for?” I ask with re-committed calm.

“I want to know what you’re going to do with your life,” she demands indignantly.

Her arms are folded, and her chin is high. Somewhere along the line, I must have insulted her and now she feels like she has to go on the attack. I just can’t do it anymore.

“Mother,” I say. “I don’t want to fight with you. You’ve had your hands and your heart full with Oona and her problems for so long. And now that she’s settled, you’re happy for her. And so am I. But my life is still a work in progress, and if my being under the same roof causes you grief—”

I think that I am doing a great job at diffusing the situation, but my mother wants to keep it going. She doesn’t want peace or resolution between us.

“You can’t answer a simple question?” she reiterates, her voice wobbly with tears. “What are you going to do with your life, Brenna Anne?” Her using my full name tells me she’s serious.

“Mom, I’m an artist,” I say without trying to sound like I’m being smart, but I begin to crumble the more I talk. “I paint. That’s what I want to do with my life. I was trying to do just that on the dining room table, which no one ever uses. And now I’m trying to do that in my room.”

She cranes her head around the door into my bedroom and snoops judgmentally at the folded bedspread.

“Doesn’t look like you’re doing such a hot job,” she snips.

And then it hits me. I do the mom math. My painting at the empty, never-used dining room table somehow signals to her that we were never the kind of family that would sit at a big gathering-type table. She probably acquired that bulky old thing with dreams of family dinners and entertaining neighbors. But it just ended up being a symbol of our broken family, my drunk father, years of pain and bitter disappointment. My wanting to make use of it has somehow

been an affront to her. That's why she's attacking me now, and why she can't let me work down there.

It becomes abundantly clear in that moment that I have to move on. I have to find a place of my own. I try to be mindful of my mother's tender feelings because that's what a grown-up would do. And it was probably high time I started acting like one. For starters, I'd like not to have to hide things about my life – like getting kicked out of school – from her anymore.

“You're absolutely right, Mom,” I say in a non-combative tone. “I'll give my life plans more serious thought.”

She doesn't know what to do with me now that I'm not fighting with her.

“Okay?” I ask quietly as I slowly close the door.

“Okay,” she says meekly.

I lay back on the bed, this time with no thoughts of sex with the daunting Mr. Michael Parker. I do, though, pull up Lauren's text and take another hit off that wonderful picture. I place the phone against my chest and the thought hits me like a slap in the face.

I have got to get the hell out of here.

A text notification makes my phone buzz. It's Lauren.

“Let's go out. Michael's working the bar at Mickey's tonight!”

I respond immediately, “God he is such a hottie. Yes, please.”

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