

A SWEET ROMANTIC COMEDY

# MY FORBIDDEN BILLIONAIRE



KRISTINE W. JOY

# My Forbidden Billionaire

Kristine W. Joy

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Edited by Caitlin Lengerich.

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# Dedication

*To the ones who refuse to settle for less. To the ones who are brave enough to carve their own path. To the ones who boldly follow their dreams in spite of their fear of failure.*

*You are worthy. You are capable. You are loved.*



# Chapter One

Josephine

## Three Months Ago

“Josephine, I think we should see other people.”

“Um, excuse me?” I blink at Tom—unsure if I’m hearing him correctly.

*Surely, I misunderstood.*

Tonight is our six-year dating anniversary. We’re at a romantic steakhouse that Tom declared—long ago—is *our* favorite. The walls are adorned with a warm brown that matches the leather seats and the wooden floors. The lighting is dim, creating a cozy ambiance that’s perfect for a couple’s night out.

*But now, it feels like a trap.*

I look across the table at the two glasses of sparkling wine and the entrée of surf and turf he ordered for us to share—very thoughtful for someone who was planning on breaking my heart over dinner.

Tom looks down at his lap, his fingers fidgeting with the hem of his shirt, before clearing his throat and looking up to meet my gaze. “I just think we’ve been together for a really long time, and maybe it’s time for us to see other people. You know, explore what else is out there.”

I sit in silence, trying to process what he just said.

I’ve spent the last six years of my life with Tom and now he’s just casually suggesting we see other people?

The thought of starting over makes my stomach churn.

“Tom, please tell me you’re joking,” I say, my voice shaking.

“Why would I be joking, Josephine?” As he speaks, Tom’s eyes flit around the restaurant, avoiding my gaze. His palms are clammy and I can see him wringing them together under the table.

It’s as if he’s already made up his mind and is just waiting for the inevitable fallout.

I shake my head, tears starting to prick at the corners of my eyes. “I can’t believe this is happening. You’re breaking up with me on our anniversary? After six years together?”

*This is not at all how I saw tonight going...*

I mean sure, things between Tom and me haven’t been perfect, but I thought we were in it for the long haul. Not to mention, my parents have been chomping at the bit for us to get married and have kids. My mom already has my wedding dress picked out. She’s going to be so disappointed.

“I know, it’s not ideal. But my heart just isn’t in it anymore.” He shrugs.

“What did I do wrong?” I ask, my voice barely above a whisper.

“It’s not you, Josephine, it’s me. I just feel like there’s something missing in our relationship.”

“How long have you been feeling this way?” I choke back tears, trying not to let them spill over.

Tom looks at me, his face blank. “To be honest, I’ve been feeling this way for a while now. I just couldn’t bring myself to say it,” he says, shrugging again, nonchalantly.

I stare at him, completely lost for words. My heart is racing, and I feel like I’m about to be sick.

Just then his phone starts to ring, shattering the awkward silence that was beginning to envelop our anniversary dinner. I see the name *Stacy* on the screen.

I watch as Tom quickly looks down at his phone and then back up at me. He hesitates for a moment before finally answering the call.

“Hey, Stacy,” Tom says, his voice suddenly cheerful. “What’s up?”

I can hear the sound of Stacy’s voice on the other end, but I can’t make out what she’s saying.

I watch as Tom’s face lights up with a smile, and I feel a sudden surge of anger.

*Is this what it’s all been about? Has he been seeing someone else behind my back?*

Tom finishes up his call with Stacy and puts his phone away before looking back up at me, his smile fading as he sees the tears streaming down my face.

“I’m sorry,” he says, reaching across the table to take my hand. “I didn’t mean to hurt you.”

I pull my hand away from his, shaking my head. “How long have you been seeing her?” I demand, my voice laced with anger.

Tom looks down at the table, his face flushing with guilt. “A few months,” he admits.

I can feel the rage building inside of me, and before I know it, I’m standing up from the table, pushing the chair back with a loud screech. The other patrons are looking over at us, but I couldn’t care less. I throw down some cash on the table to cover my half of the bill and then put on my coat as fast as I can.

Tom tries to grab my arm, but I shake it off.

“Josephine, wait. Please, let me explain,” he says.

I turn around to face him, tears streaming down my face. “Explain what? You’ve been cheating on me for who knows how long, and you decide to break up with me on our anniversary? No, Tom. I don’t want to hear it,” I snap.

I feel like a fool for not seeing the signs sooner. All those times he was distant or on his phone, I should have known something was wrong.

“Wait ... please don’t leave. I don’t have any money left to pay the bill,” he admits sheepishly, looking down at the floor.

I glare at him, unable to believe the gall he has to ask for anything from me now. “You brought me to a fancy restaurant to break up with me, and you didn’t even bring enough money

to pay for the meal? Unbelievable,” I say, my voice dripping with sarcasm.

“I’m sorry,” Tom says, looking up at me.

I shake my head, feeling nauseous. “Save your apologies. You’ve made your choice, and you can deal with the consequences. Goodbye, Tom,” I say firmly before grabbing my cash from the table. “Stacy can cover your bills from now on,” I add with a bitter laugh before storming out of the restaurant, leaving him to deal with the mess he created.

As I walk out onto the street, the cold wind hits me, sending shivers down my spine. I pull my coat tighter around me, trying to block out the pain I feel inside.

*I can't believe I wasted six years of my life with a man like that.*

I keep walking, even though I have no idea where I’m going to go, or how I’m going to get there.

Tom and I live together—our lease isn’t up for another three months. But there’s no way I’m going back there, not after what he’s done. I’d rather live in a tent than endure three more months in an apartment with *him*.

I walk through the emptiness of the night, tears streaming down my face.

The only thing I can hear is the sound of my own sobs.

I’m heartbroken. Embarrassed. Ashamed. I can’t decide who I’m more angry at—Tom for cheating, or myself for staying

and trying to make things work with him for *far* longer than I should have.

As I turn a corner, still reeling from the breakup, I suddenly find myself running face-first into a solid mass of chest and shoulder.

Startled, I take a step back and look up at the face of a tall stranger who catches me before I fall.

I blink rapidly, trying to refocus my eyes and take in the sight before me.

The man is wearing a black suit that fits his muscular frame like it was tailored specifically for him, and his dark hair falls in tousled waves over his forehead.

“Are you okay?” he asks, his voice deep and comforting.

“I’m fine.” I sniffle, trying to sound more confident than I actually feel, not wanting to bother a stranger with my problems.

“It doesn’t seem like you’re fine,” he says, looking at me with concern.

I let out a hollow laugh. “What gave it away? Was it the tears, or the fact that I’m walking alone in the middle of the night?”

He gives me a small smile, and I feel my heart flutter a little in my chest. “Both,” he says, his eyes never leaving mine.

I nod, momentarily forgetting all my troubles as I stare up at him. He’s about six-foot-five with a strong build, and his

piercing, hazel eyes seem to light up in the darkness. His lips are full and inviting and his jawline is sharp and defined. I can't help but feel drawn to him, even in my current state.

I mean, this man could *easily* put Chris Hemsworth to shame.

Too bad I didn't wear waterproof mascara tonight. Because I'm almost certain I look like the main character of a horror film right about now.

He gives me a small smile, his eyes crinkling at the corners. "Is there anything I can do to help?" he asks, his voice full of compassion.

"Not unless you're a black belt in karate and can take out my cheating ex-boyfriend with one swift kick," I joke, feeling a tiny bit of relief.

He chuckles, the sound warm and soothing. "Unfortunately, I'm not a black belt in karate, but I *can* buy you a cup of hot cocoa to warm you up," he offers.

I look up at him, surprised by his kindness. I can't even remember a time that Tom showed me the kind of care and concern that this stranger is showing me right now.

It's refreshing and slightly overwhelming all at the same time.

"That's very sweet of you, but I don't think I should be accepting drinks from strangers in the middle of the night," I joke weakly. Although ... considering Tom cut our dinner short, it can't be much later than 8:30 PM—which might as



well be the middle of the night at this point because I prefer to be in bed by now.

He smiles at me, his eyes crinkling again. “I understand your hesitation. My name’s Jacob. There, now we’re not strangers anymore,” he says, extending his hand.

I take it, feeling a jolt of electricity run through my body at his touch. “I’m Josephine,” I say, trying to keep my voice steady.

“Well, Josephine, it’s a pleasure to meet you. If you change your mind about the hot cocoa, you can find me at the café down the street,” he says, gesturing to a nearby coffee shop.

I smile at him, feeling grateful for his kind offer. “Thanks, Jacob. But I think it’s best I go home and try to forget this evening ever happened,” I say.

He nods his head, his eyes still filled with concern. “Okay, well, at least take this.” He pulls out a handkerchief from his pocket and offers it to me. “It looks like you need it more than I do.”

I take the handkerchief gratefully, dabbing at my eyes. “Thank you,” I whisper, feeling a little embarrassed.

He nods his head, taking a step back. “Take care of yourself,” he says before turning and walking away. I watch as he takes a few steps in the direction of the cafe, but then he turns back to me once more. “You know, sometimes it’s the things that break us that make us stronger,” he says, his eyes full of wisdom.

I watch as he disappears into the night, feeling a sense of comfort in his words.

Maybe he's right. Maybe this breakup will make me stronger.

I clutch the handkerchief in my hands, feeling a small sense of hope begin to bud inside me. It's a long road ahead, but maybe one day I can look back on this moment and be grateful for the lessons it taught me.

As I walk, I can feel the fresh tears starting to flow once again. But this time, they're not tears of sadness or anger.

They're tears of hope.

Hope that someday, I'll be able to move on from Tom and find someone who truly loves and respects me.

# Chapter Two

Jacob

## Three Months Ago

“What can I get you tonight, sir?” The barista smiles at me from across the counter.

“I’ll have two hot chocolates, please.”

“Great. That’ll be seven dollars and fifty-nine cents.”

I pull out my wallet, handing the barista a crisp one-hundred dollar bill. “You can keep the change.”

“Oh, thank you, sir. That’s very generous of you,” the barista says with a smile before turning to make the drinks.

I take a seat at one of the tables and look around the café. It’s cozy, with a warm yellow glow spilling from the lamps scattered across the room. The walls are lined with bookshelves, filled with an assortment of novels and magazines. Even though it’s late in the evening, there are still a few people scattered around, either chatting quietly or tapping away on their laptops.

It’s one of my favorite spots in the city, and I like to come here to clear my head before heading home after a long day of work.

The barista soon arrives with both hot chocolates, setting them down on the table in front of me. I take a sip of mine and close my eyes as the hot liquid slides down my throat. I can feel my tense shoulders start to relax.

I can’t help but think about the woman I just met.

Josephine was gorgeous, with short blonde hair that fell in perfect waves around her face and big beautiful eyes that were a stunning shade of green—it's a shame they were holding so much pain.

My urge to comfort her was almost overwhelming.

The way her tears glistened in the moonlight, the sadness etched on her face—it was almost too much for me to bear.

Because the truth is, I know that look all too well. I saw it in the mirror every night after my wife passed away ten years ago, leaving me alone to raise our newborn daughter.

The pain of losing someone you love is never easy.

Which is why I offered her the same advice my grandmother gave me when I lost my wife—sometimes it's the things that break us that make us stronger.

I take another sip of my hot chocolate, before collecting my things.

I glance over my shoulder one last time in hopes that Josephine might have changed her mind, and decided to join me. But there's no sight of her, leaving only the memories of our brief encounter behind.



*“Daddy! You’re home!”*

My eyes light up as I see my daughter running towards me, her arms outstretched for a hug. I scoop her up, breathing in

her sweet scent.

“You know I always come home, baby girl,” I say, kissing her forehead gently.

“I stayed up late tonight because I wanted to see you. I missed you so much,” she says, cuddling into my chest.

“I missed you too, sweetie,” I say, walking towards the kitchen with her in my arms. “I had a feeling you’d be up, so I brought you hot cocoa.”

“Yay! My favorite! Thank you, Daddy!” My heart swells with pride as I see the pure joy on her face.

I set her down at the kitchen table, and grab the container of marshmallows from the pantry. She beams at me, her eyes sparkling with excitement as I sprinkle the fluffy treats on top of her cocoa, the steam rising up in a cloud.

I sit down beside her, watching as she takes a sip. Her brown hair falls in curls around her face, just like her mother’s used to. She looks so content, so happy. It’s moments like these that remind me why I keep going, why I keep pushing through the challenges of being a single parent.

I may not have been able to save my wife, but I’m determined to give my daughter all the love and happiness in the world.

“Hey, Daddy,” she says, looking up at me with her sparkling green eyes.

“Yes, sweet girl?”

“Why do you keep having to work so late?” she asks quietly. “It’s lonely without you.”

My heart sinks a little as I realize she may have noticed my late nights more than I thought. She has loving grandparents, a nanny, *and* a butler. I was sure she couldn’t possibly notice my absence as much as she’s saying.

But then again, children can sense things that we adults cannot.

“I know it’s been hard these past couple weeks, but sometimes I have to work late to get the job done. And this job is how I’m able to provide for us,” I explain gently, taking her hand in mine.

As the CEO of my company, it means I have to work late sometimes. This month marks the end of our fiscal year—which requires extra effort from me and my team.

“I understand,” she says, nodding her head. “I just wish you could stay home with me.”

As much as I *hate* being away from my daughter for any length of time, this job is the reason I’m able to give her the comfortable life she deserves. But I don’t want her to think that her happiness is any less important to me than my work.

“I’m sorry, Clem,” I say, cupping her face gently in my hands. “But it doesn’t mean I love you any less. You’re the most important thing in the world to me,” I add.

She looks up at me with eyes so full of sorrow and loneliness that my heart aches for her. I pull her close, hoping to pour

every ounce of love I feel for her into this embrace. As she buries her face into my chest, I can feel her take a deep breath.

“I love you too, Daddy,” she whispers.

I hold her tightly, feeling the weight of her small body against mine. Being a single parent is never easy, but moments like this, when we lovingly embrace, make it all worth it.

After a few minutes, she pulls away from me, and yawns widely, her eyes starting to droop. “Come on, Clementine, it’s time for bed,” I say, standing up and holding out my hand.

She takes it, and we walk upstairs. “Can we read a story first?” she asks.

“Of course, sweetie,” I say, walking into her room. “Which one do you want tonight?”

She looks up at me, a mischievous smile on her lips. “The one about the frog prince.”

I chuckle softly, knowing that’s been her favorite bedtime story since she was three. “All right. Let’s hop-to-it then,” I say, winking at her.

She giggles, her eyes lighting up as she bounces onto her bed and snuggles under the covers. I sit down next to her and begin reading.

“Do you think maybe one day you’ll get married again?” she asks, interrupting my reading.

I pause for a moment, taken aback by her question. “Why do you ask that, sweetie?”



“All my friends have moms and I want one too...”

Her words hit me like a punch in the gut.

I take a deep breath, feeling a sudden wave of guilt wash over me.

*I knew this day would come.*

Clementine is ten years old, *of course* she's starting to crave a mother figure in her life. All she knows of her mother is what she sees in pictures.

She never got the chance to meet her, to feel her love and warmth.

Chelsea was the most amazing woman I've ever known. She was my high school sweetheart and the love of my life. She was the kind of person who lit up the room with her smile and exuded kindness and warmth wherever she went.

We married soon after high school and it felt like we were invincible. We had everything we needed as long as we had each other. She was so supportive of my career, even when it meant long hours and business trips. She always believed in me and my dreams, and I felt like I could conquer the world with her by my side.

I still remember the moment we found out she was pregnant with Clementine. It was the happiest day of our lives. We had always talked about starting a family and it was finally happening. Chelsea was over the moon and we couldn't stop smiling.

I remember the day I took her to the hospital. The joy and anticipation I felt was palpable—we had been waiting for that moment for what felt like forever.

But life had other plans for us.

The labor was difficult, and Chelsea's health deteriorated rapidly. I stood by, helplessly, as the doctors tried everything they could to save her. But it was too late. The love of my life slipped away, leaving me alone with a tiny newborn in my arms.

It took me a long time to come to terms with my loss and accept my new reality. I threw myself into my work, trying to distract myself from the pain. But I soon realized that wasn't the answer. My daughter needed me, and I needed her. We were each other's family, and I was determined to be the best father possible.

We've been through *so* much together.

We've grown up together.

And it's hard to imagine life any other way.

I look down at Clementine, her eyes still fixed on me, waiting for an answer. "I don't know," I say, finally. "I've been so focused on raising you that I haven't really thought about it."

"Well, maybe you *should* think about it, Daddy. You deserve to be happy too," she says, placing a small hand on my arm.

I can't help but smile at her maturity and kindness.

She truly is an amazing little girl.

It's been a long time since I've even thought about dating, let alone getting married again. But if I'm honest with myself, there are days when this ginormous house feels much too large for just the two of us. Days where I long for a companion—someone to confide in, and share in life's precious moments. And now, after seeing the loneliness in my daughter's eyes, I can't help but feel that maybe it's time to start considering it.

"I'll tell you what, if I ever meet someone who makes me as happy as Mommy did, and who loves you as much as I do, then I'll consider it," I say, tucking her in tighter and kissing her forehead. "But until then, you're stuck with me."

She nods, her eyes shining with a mix of hope and contentment.

We finish the story, and I kiss her forehead once more. "Goodnight, sweetie. Sleep tight."

"Goodnight, Daddy. I love you."

"I love you too," I say, walking out of her room and closing the door softly behind me.

As I make my way down the hall to my own room, I can't help but replay the conversation I just had with Clementine. Maybe it *is* time to actually start putting myself out there again, to start looking for someone to share my life with.

But for now, I'm content with the love I have from my daughter. She's the reason I keep going every day, the light that guides me through the darkness.

And for that, I am eternally grateful.

# Chapter Three

## Josephine

“This place is—”

“Be nice, Larisa!” Emmy interjects, giving her a very clear warning glance as they struggle to arrange my couch into place.

“What? I wasn’t going to say anything bad. It’s just so much smaller than your old apartment, Jo, that’s all.” Larisa shrugs.

“Well, I shared my old apartment with Tom—we split the bills. Right now, this is all I can afford.” I turn my attention to the kitchen cupboards.

After couch surfing for three months, I’m *so* grateful to be in my own space. My back aches and my arms are sore from stacking boxes, but now that my best friends are here, I’ve got a second wind.

“In my opinion, it’s really cute. And cozy, and romantic.” Emmy smiles and plops down noisily on the couch. A layer of

dust rises all around her and she starts to fan it away with her hand. “This thing needs a good dusting.”

“What’re you waiting for?” Larisa replies, pointing at the vacuum cleaner.

“I suppose you’re right.” She grabs the vacuum and begins unraveling the power cord to plug it in. “Anyway, have you heard from him?”

“Who? Tom?” I reply, continuing to stack my mismatched coffee mugs and glasses.

It’s moments like these where I regret my obsession with buying a cute souvenir coffee mug from every new place I visit. Packing and unpacking them is the absolute worst. But at least it’s giving me something to do with my hands.

“Of course, not. He’s ... happy, I presume, with his side piece,” I say, swallowing the hurt I’ve so desperately been trying to forget.

“Is it true that he and his ‘side piece’ are in an exclusive relationship now?” Larisa asks as she begins to break down and fold the now-empty cardboard moving boxes—which I’m incredibly grateful for, because if it were up to me, I’d end up with a massive collection of boxes inside of boxes that permanently lives in the closet.

“Yep.” I sigh. “My mom was the *first* to let me know they became Facebook official last week.” I roll my eyes.

“What the heck is your mom’s deal? Why is she so *obsessed* with Tom?” Emmy asks.

“She always liked him more than I did. Mainly because he has a trust fund—she saw him as her ticket to a higher social status,” I say, wincing.

I’ll never forget how excited both my parents were when Tom and I started dating—mainly because I’ve never seen them that happy about anything I’ve done in my life before or since. They fawned over him, thinking he was perfect for me—a trust fund baby with a social status that made them giddy with excitement.

“Pffft, a trust fund he squandered away every month on meaningless crap.” Larisa scoffs.

It’s true. Tom would frequently spend the entirety of his monthly allowance buying drinks at the club or taking his friends on vacations, leaving me to pay for our rent and groceries, on top of my hefty student loan bills.

“Ugh, don’t remind me...” I huff. “But my mom will never understand that. You both know my parents. They only care about appearances and money.”

“But Tom *cheated* on you. You’re better off without him,” Larisa says sternly, folding the last of the boxes.

“I know, I know. I just wish my parents saw it that way. All they’ve ever wanted for me since I was in diapers is to get married and have kids with a wealthy man who can provide for our family. In fact, I’m pretty sure my relationship with Tom was the *only* thing in my life my mom’s ever been proud of. But ... now that it’s over, she’s back to criticizing everything I do. She thinks I’m a failure.”

“That’s just insane. I’m so sorry, Jo!” Emmy squeezes my shoulder. “You’re a wonderful and accomplished woman. And the fact your parents don’t see that is a shame. I mean ... we’ve known each other since high school. You graduated at the top of your class and then went on to *Harvard*. You received countless recommendation letters—”

“Emmy, my parents are not impressed by good grades and work accolades,” I interject. “They just want to see a wedding ring and sonogram—or three. My diplomas and my recommendation letters are as good as a Walmart receipt to them.”

I try to brush it off, but the truth is, it hurts.

I’ve always wanted a close relationship with my parents. I’ve spent my *entire* life trying to please them and live up to their expectations of me.

But it seems like no matter what I do, it’s never enough.

*And now, here I am, picking up the pieces and rebuilding my life—all because I chose to stay with a mediocre man for far too long, just to try to make my parents happy.*

I shake my head at the thought.

I’ve spent a lot of time reflecting over the past three months. I finally realized that Tom was *their* choice, not mine.

Long before he cheated on me, I knew deep down that Tom wasn’t right for me. He had no drive, no ambition, and was content with mediocrity, while I’ve always wanted more. He’s never worked a day in his life, while I’ve spent years building



a successful teaching career—a career that I love, but one that my parents consider futile.

Yet, even though I was so desperately unhappy with him, I stayed because I thought that maybe if I stuck it out, my parents would finally be proud of me. I stayed because I was simply too afraid to reject the image of the “perfect” life my parents had painted for me.

But now I know better.

I mean sure, I always imagined that at twenty-nine years old I would be married with a family. And I definitely *want* a family. But only with the right person, for the right reasons.

Until that person comes along, I’d much rather be single. Because, despite what my parents think, I can *finally* see that I don’t need a man to define my worth.

And I definitely don’t need my parents’ approval in order to live my life.

“I’m so sorry, Jo,” Emmy says, giving me a sympathetic look.

“It’s okay. I’m used to it,” I reply, shrugging off the familiar feeling of disappointment.

“Listen, we’re all here for you. You don’t have to do this alone,” Larisa says, putting a reassuring hand on my shoulder.

I smile, grateful for the reminder.

“Alright girls, we’re supposed to be having *fun*, remember? Jo, this is a brand-new start for you—on all accounts! You’re

starting your new job this week, at a *very* fancy school, and now you have this brand-new apartment.” Emmy gestures around the room. “To speak your literature language, this is a new chapter. We should be celebrating!”

Emmy is right—as always—and I appreciate that she’s sincerely trying to pull me out of my funk.

I take a deep breath and try to focus on the positive.

After the breakup, I found myself diving headfirst into my career, until I finally landed this job at one of the most prestigious private schools in the country—Jameson Juniper Hall. It’s a great job, with excellent benefits and a wonderful salary. And I’m super proud of myself—even if my life hasn’t gone exactly according to plan.

*This is a new chapter in my life, and I’m determined to make it a good one.*

I turn and face my best friends with a newfound sense of determination. “You’re right, Em. This is a new start for me, and I’m not going to let anyone hold me back from achieving my dreams.”

“That’s the spirit!” Emmy exclaims, throwing her arms up in the air.

“I’m going to be the *best* literature instructor that school has ever seen,” I declare.

“You’re definitely going to be the most *lit* instructor there,” Larisa jokes, and we all burst into giggles. “For real though ...

literature instructor? Why is everything at that school *so* formal?”

“Larisa, it’s the *best* private school in America, they probably want to sound fancy,” Emmy retorts.

“I have no idea. But they pay *really* well, and I’ve got a mountain of student loan debt, so they can call me whatever they want.” I laugh. “Like you said, this is the start of a new chapter. And this new apartment and new job is only the beginning. I’m *finally* living my life on my own terms, and I’m determined to come out of this situation better than ever,” I say, feeling a sense of power surge through me.

“That’s the Jo we know and love,” Larisa says, grinning from ear to ear.

“Because as a wise man once said, sometimes it’s the things that break us that make us stronger,” I declare.

“You mean as the hot man who you bumped into on the sidewalk once said...” Larisa giggles.

I roll my eyes, but a smile spreads across my face at the memory of Jacob—given my mental state at the time, the details of his appearance are a bit fuzzy now—but I remember his piercing hazel eyes that seemed to look right through me. Our small encounter left a lasting impression on me. The man was there for me in my darkest hour, even though he didn’t know me.

It was a brief moment, but it renewed my faith in humanity.

“I still can’t believe you didn’t take him up on his offer for hot cocoa. You *love* hot cocoa.” Emmy laughs.

“Seriously? Tom had *just* broken up with me. I had mascara running down my face and looked like a hot mess. The *last* thing I wanted to do was go to a cafe with some stranger,” I reply, chuckling at the memory. “I’m honestly surprised he didn’t call the cops on me for public disturbance.”

My friends laugh along with me, and for a moment, the weight of my parents’ expectations, and Tom’s infidelity, lifts off my shoulders. I realize that I have a great support system in my friends, and I’m grateful for them.

“Well, who knows? Maybe you’ll bump into him again,” Larisa suggests.

I shake my head, trying to shake the thought out of my mind. “I highly doubt it.” But even as I say it, a tiny part of me hopes that I’m wrong.

*Maybe fate will bring us together again somehow.*

I push the thought aside and focus on my friends. We spend the rest of the evening laughing and catching up, and before I know it, it’s well past midnight.

Emmy and Larisa decide to stay over, and we all curl up on the couch, watching old movies and talking until we finally fall asleep.

As I drift off, my mind wanders back to Jacob. I can’t help but wonder what might have happened if I had taken him up on his offer for hot cocoa. I know that I probably shouldn’t

think too much about it, but there's just something about him that I can't shake.

But for now, at least, I'm surrounded by my friends.

And for the first time in a while, I feel like everything is going to be okay.

# Chapter Four

## Josephine

“Are you even listening to me, Miss Andrews?”

It’s the first day of school and I’m making a sincere effort to listen to what this woman is saying right now, but she’s been scolding me for the past three minutes and it’s becoming increasingly hard to focus.

She claps her hands at me twice in quick succession, as if I’m a small child or worse, a dog.

“Of course, I’m listening to you, Ms. ... Abadie...” I reply, still uncertain about how to properly pronounce her name. Ms. Abadie is the Head of Education at Jameson Juniper Hall, so it’s best not to cross her. Especially not on my *first* day working here.

*I hope I didn’t just give her another reason to yell at me.*

“It’s pronounced A-bah-dee! It’s French.” A small droplet of saliva jumps from her mouth and lands neatly on the floor.

“My apologies, Ms. Abadie.”

“Miss Andrews, you should be ashamed of yourself! How could you *possibly* think that your outfit is appropriate for an elite, private school such as Jameson Juniper Hall? And on the first day, no less.” Her eyebrows knit together.

I look down and analyze myself as if I don’t already know what I’m wearing. I’ve had this outfit picked out for weeks. This pinstriped pantsuit is the perfect combination of professional and chic. “Ms. Abadie ... could you please explain what the issue is? With my outfit, I mean? What about this suit is inappropriate?”

“Don’t be coy,” she hisses. “It’s the color that’s not up to code. That ... horrendous, *dazzling* color. You might as well be wearing a scarlet letter.”

I press my lips together to prevent any unwanted words from leaving my mouth regarding her reference to the classic, literary novel I most definitely *won’t* be teaching my class of elementary-aged children.

My suit is navy blue. What’s so scandalous about *navy blue*?

“Ms. Abadie, I really don’t understand—”

“Jameson Juniper Hall only allows white, black, and muted, neutral tones,” she interjects. “Navy blue—well, *any* shade of blue, for that matter—is strictly forbidden. It’s too ... disco.”

“Disco? Navy blue? I ... well, Studio 54 was a little before my time, but I can’t imagine navy blue was a particularly popular wardrobe color at dance clubs—even now. When’s the last time you set foot in a disco, Ms. Abadie?” I reply, hoping

that a light joke will take the edge off this, otherwise tense, interaction. But no sooner than the words leave my mouth, I'm stricken with the horror that this has been *entirely* the wrong thing to say. Ms. Abadie's face turns to a shade of green.

She looks like a pickle that's ready to burst.

*And I'm pretty certain I just dug my own grave.*

"That ... is *not* ... the point," her words come out through gritted teeth, her lips thin as paper. "Find something else to wear before the meet-and-greet with the parents." Ms. Abadie pivots and storms off down the hall. I can hear the echo of her heels clicking against the creaky, hardwood floors as she rounds the corner and disappears from sight.

*Fantastic.*

How am I supposed to change my clothes with so little time left?

A woman approaches me through the stone archway on my left, holding a tall stack of folders.

"Do you need some help with those?" I ask, eager to move past my awkward interaction with Ms. Abadie.

"That would be *so* helpful, thank you." She hands me half the stack. "I just need to take these to my office. Hey, you're the new literature instructor, right?"

"Yes! I'm Josephine Andrews. It's nice to meet you!" I try to shake her hand but it's impossible now that we're both carrying heavy folders.



“It’s nice to meet you, too. I’m Stephanie Harris, I teach chemistry. We’re all so happy you’re joining us!”

“Oh, thank you. But I’m not so sure about all that ... I just had a run-in with the Head of Education and ... I don’t think I made the best first impression.” I grimace.

“Oh no. What happened?” Stephanie’s eyes widen.

“She just informed me that I need to change my clothes before the meet-and-greet with the parents this morning. Apparently, navy blue is not appropriate?”

“Well, she’s right. Navy blue isn’t on the list of permitted colors. But ... didn’t she send you an email about all this?” Stephanie carefully balances the stack folders in one arm as she unlocks the door to her office.

“No. Was she supposed to?” I ask.

“Yep. Like you said, she’s the Head of Education, it’s quite literally her *job* to inform you. But ... I can’t say I’m surprised...”

Stephanie’s office is small but cozy. As expected, her walls are lined with chemistry books and all sorts of glass vials and test tubes filled with colorful liquids. I’m dying to ask what’s in them, but this *Ms. Abadie business* is more important at the moment.

“Wait ... are you suggesting that she didn’t share this info with me on purpose?”

“That’s exactly what I’m saying!” Stephanie chuckles while I watch her in surprise. “Look, Josephine, don’t even sweat it.

Everyone here at the school knows that Ms. Abadie wants to get promoted. She's been gunning for the Deputy Director position for the longest time. This is her tactic—she basically tries to sabotage every single teacher here in order to elevate herself. We all pretty much despise her.”

“Why hasn't anyone done anything about it?” I ask.

“Because she's a sneaky little thing. She does *just* enough to get under everyone's skin, but never enough to warrant a formal complaint. Like, take what happened to you for example. What are you supposed to do? Go to the Headmaster and tell him that Ms. Abadie didn't send you an email?”

“That would sound ridiculous.”

“Exactly.” She nods.

And just like that, my first day at Jameson Juniper Hall has become packed with intrigue and conspiracy. I'm already aware that working as an instructor at one of the best private schools in the country is not going to be a walk in the park, but I haven't even been here a full hour and the games have already started.

“Are there any other rules I should be aware of?”

“Oh yes. There's a whole handbook of them,” she replies, opening up her desk drawer and pulling out a thick booklet. “Here, take this.”

I take the handbook from her and flip through it, noticing that it's full of pages and pages of rules and regulations. It's overwhelming.

“Don’t worry, you’ll get the hang of it soon enough,” Stephanie says, noticing the look of bewilderment on my face. “And if you ever have any questions, just come to me. I’ve been here for a while and I know how things work.”

“Thanks, Stephanie. You’re really kind.”

“It’s my pleasure. Now, let’s do something about your outfit before your meet-and-greet,” Stephanie says.

I watch as she opens the small closet next to her desk. There’s a series of white lab coats packed in there, a few overalls, and some casual clothes. She pulls out a long, but quite stylish, black coat and hands it to me.

“There you go. I can’t do anything about your pants, but this should do. At least it’s long enough to cover them a little. And it’s black—so, Ms. Abadie won’t comment anymore.”

“This is *incredible*. You are a lifesaver, Stephanie! I mean it!”

“Don’t mention it! You can buy me a cup of coffee or something.” She winks. “But now I really have to go. I’ve got my own meet-and-greet in the chemistry lab and I have a senior class this year, among others. They’ll want to know how to prepare for the final exams. Wish me luck!”

She waltzes out of her own office while I follow suit, pulling on the black coat to conceal my—apparently shameful—navy blue wardrobe. It’s not a perfect match, but it will do quite well.

As I make my way toward the literature classroom—*my* classroom—tension grips the back of my neck as my knees weaken. I slow my pace.

*This is it.*

I try not to bump into the hundreds of parents and students who have filled the hallways. They rush by like little rivulets, flowing in the direction of every classroom and gathering space that the school has to offer. I can see them entering the library and running down the stairs to the chemistry and physics labs.

And then, out of the crowd, a dashing man stands out like a Greek statue—perfectly carved and poised. Tall and athletic, too—impossibly handsome.

He's walking down the corridor as if he owns the entire building, unbothered by the moms surrounding him, whose heads are on swivels as they're clearly gawking—overcome by his good looks. Before I get the chance to wonder which classroom he's heading to, he disappears into mine.

Voices murmur from inside and my palms glisten as I step toward the open door. It's my first day, my first meeting, and a countless number of parents are waiting for me. My heart is beating so hard that I fear it might rip through my ribcage. My breath simply won't settle down.

*Breathe in. Breathe out.*

I brace myself and enter the hall, and about a hundred pairs of eyes suddenly turn and stare at me.

I walk to my desk and pull out my laptop. I don't think I've ever been this aware of my hands. My fingers are trembling on the keys of the laptop as I prepare my presentation. My knees are wobbling slightly behind my desk, while my throat constricts.

I'm overcome with the realization that I must actually *address* these people.

Public speaking is a bit frightening. I've gotten comfortable speaking in front of students, but talking to parents is a whole different ball game. And this classroom is overflowing with parents who are watching my every move, like wolves ready to pounce on the deer in the clearing.

They're waiting to pounce on *me*—the woman who's teaching literature to their beloved children. This is my moment to make a good impression—to show what I'm capable of.

“Good morning, everyone! My name is Josephine Andrews, and I'm the new literature instructor here at Jameson Juniper Hall! Thank you so much for being here today.” I glance up at the screen to ensure my PowerPoint is on display. “I've prepared a brief presentation for you concerning the school year, the curriculum, and the exams that your children will be facing. If you have any questions, at any point, please—feel free to interject.”

As I scan the room at large, I can see that quite a few of the parents are nodding. That's a good sign—so I charge on, emboldened by this.

“We’ll be starting with Chaucer and then will make our way through early British literature until we get to Shakespeare. I plan on including a few examples of European literature as well, which have proven to be beneficial for children of their age, such as *Don Quixote*...”

I cast another glance around the room, and I can see that many of the parents are now taking notes. My knees start to fortify a little and I click the space bar for the new slide.

“Recent studies prove that the inclusion of these chapters, as well as the mention of classic literary works has impressive benefits for the cognitive development of children between the ages of ten and fourteen, which is why—”

“What do you think?” a deep voice from the back of the room interrupts me.

Suddenly, the entire room goes silent—so quiet, it feels like I’ve entered one of those strange, sensory deprivation chambers. I whip around to see who’s talking but can’t find the source. Then, just moments later, the voice speaks once again.

“What do *you* think?”

There he is. It’s the tall, debonair man from earlier—sitting in the middle of the ancient hall, trying his best to fit his massive frame into one of the wooden desks.

“I’m sorry?” I mumble, doing my best to seem unphased by just how hot this dad is. His sharp jawline, chiseled features, and piercing gaze send my heart racing as I try to regain my

composure. Which is difficult considering I'm already nervous from talking in front of so many people.

He grins, and I feel my insides clench. "What do *you* think of Don Quixote?"

I'm a little taken aback by his question. Though, it's not a condescending one. In fact, the more I stare into his face, the more I realize that he wants to know ... my opinion. My *personal* opinion.

I try to answer as professionally as I can. "Well, sir, Don Quixote is a classic piece of literature—a story about self-delusion and the power of imagination, but it also explores issues of class and gender. It's a multifaceted work, and I believe that it can benefit young students by exposing them to different perspectives and historical contexts."

He nods and his lips curl into a small smile.

I feel a twinge of pride as I notice a few other parents nodding along with him in agreement.

*I may be a little nervous, but I know my stuff.*

"That's an interesting take," his deep voice echoes in the stillness of the room, and I do my best to ignore the sudden heat rising within me. "And what's your take on the benefits of literature outside of the classroom, say, in everyday life?"

I can't help but smile at his question.

*This is what I'm passionate about—teaching literature and its importance outside of the classroom.*

I shift my weight, feeling the tension in my shoulders dissipate a bit. “Well, literature, in my opinion, has the power to shape our lives in ways we might not even realize. Reading enables us to empathize with different people from different backgrounds, which helps us become more understanding and compassionate in our daily interactions. It also helps us think critically and creatively, which is invaluable in any aspect of life—be it personal or professional.”

His eyes widen, and I can see his lips part slightly. I watch as he inhales deeply, as if trying to hide his reaction. “You’re quite passionate about this,” he says, leaning back in his seat.

I feel myself blush. “I am. I truly believe that literature has the power to change the world, one person at a time.”

He cocks his head to the side, a small smirk tugging at the corners of his lips. “Well, I couldn’t agree more.”

I smile at him, feeling a rush of adrenaline coursing through my veins at his agreement, nearly forgetting that there are other parents in the room.

“Are there any other questions?” I ask to the room at large, hoping to steer the conversation away from this intense connection I feel with the handsome man at the back of the room.

The room remains silent, and I let out a small sigh of relief and continue on with my presentation.

Even though I actively avoid looking at him, so as not to invite more questions, I know that he’s watching me intently.



He's the only parent without a laptop, tablet, or even an old-fashioned notepad on which to scribble a few ideas. He's just sitting at the wooden desk, watching me as if I'm there for his personal entertainment.

I rush through the slides even though I don't want to, but it's the best I can do now.

Finally, the presentation is over and I give a final word about exams. The parents seem satisfied so I shut my laptop, and breathe a sigh of relief as the deafening sound of wooden chairs scraping across the floor echoes within the room.

The parents proceed to get up and exit the literature hall, finally leaving me to breathe in peace, probably for the first time today.

"Excuse me..."

From the sea of people clearing out the room, he emerges like some god of the ancient world, tall and imposing, striding with large steps toward me.

"Yes? Do you have a question about the curriculum?" My voice comes out strained and squeaky, like a teenage boy going through puberty, making me even more embarrassed than I was before. I just know my cheeks are flushed.

"No, not exactly. The curriculum is fine. Perfect, actually. You're going to do a wonderful job, Miss Andrews," he says in a deep and gravelly voice.

*Is he flirting with me?*

I lean against the desk to steady myself.

*No, of course not. It's all in my head.*

“Thank you, Mister...”

“Carlton!” He grins, revealing pearly white teeth and deep dimples that make him all the more attractive. Soft crinkles appear at the edges of his hazel eyes. “Jacob Carlton!” he says, as his massive hand extends and looks for mine in the small space between us.

I reach out and allow my own hand to rest inside the strong grip of his palm for a few seconds. I watch in shock as his thumb caresses my skin a little, sending a shiver down my spine, before releasing his grip.

And that's when I realize...

*It's him.*

*Jacob.*

# Chapter Five

## Jacob

I can't believe it's *her*. The pretty woman I bumped into on the street a few months ago is *here*, teaching literature to my daughter's class.

*Josephine Andrews.*

Her name sounds like music to my ears.

She looks just as beautiful as I remember her. Her thick blonde hair is pulled back into a sleek ponytail, her bangs perfectly frame her face, and her skin looks like smooth porcelain in the overhead lights of the literature hall.

I watch as she realizes who I am, her eyes widen slightly before she quickly regains her composure. The air between us crackles with an unknown tension, and I can feel her eyes on me, assessing me.

I can't help but feel drawn to her.

Perhaps it's the way she speaks about literature with such passion, or maybe it's the sparkle in her eyes as they stare back

at mine.

I try to keep my cool, not wanting to come off too strong. Though, I can feel a smile pull at my lips as I think about the chance of fate that has brought us together again.

“Josephine Andrews,” I say, holding her gaze. “It’s good to see you again.”

Her cheeks flush a light pink and I feel more and more attracted to her by the second.

“It’s nice to see you too, Mr. Carlton,” Josephine says, tucking a stray hair behind her ear. “I remember bumping into you a few months ago.”

I chuckle, thinking back to that day. “Yes, it’s an encounter I haven’t been able to forget. I offered to buy you hot cocoa, but you declined.”

Josephine smiles, her eyes sparkling with humor. “Yes, I remember. I didn’t want to take advantage of your kindness.”

I shake my head. “It would have been no trouble.” I pause, studying her. “Though, I’m glad fate brought us together again.”

She blushes again and I can’t help but feel a sense of pride knowing that I’m the reason for it. “So, what is it that brings you to Jameson Juniper Hall?” she asks.

“I’m here for my ten-year-old daughter, Clementine. She’ll be a student in your class,” I say, suddenly feeling a slight sense of awkwardness that I am a parent and Josephine is a *teacher*.

A small smile graces her lips. “That’s wonderful. I hope she enjoys my class. I’m always excited to have students who are eager to learn.”

“I have no doubt she will,” I say, feeling a sense of warmth fill me. “She’s been looking forward to it for weeks.”

Josephine nods, her eyes still locked on mine. As we stand there in silence, I can feel the tension between us growing stronger and stronger.

I wonder if she feels it too.

It’s like a magnetic pull drawing us together, and I can’t help but want to get closer to her.

“Josephine, I was wondering if you might—”

“Miss Andrews!” a voice interrupts us. We both turn to see who it is.

Josephine straightens up and composes herself. “Yes, Ms. Abadie?”

“I hope you’re finished here, Miss Andrews. I need to have a word with you, immediately.”

Josephine’s face turns white with worry as she nods. “Yes, of course.”

Ms. Abadie leads Josephine away and I watch as they disappear down a dim hallway. I can’t help but wonder what could be so urgent that Ms. Abadie had to pull her away so suddenly.

*Hopefully, Josephine isn’t in trouble.*

As I walk out of the literature hall, I spot Clementine talking animatedly to some kids her age. She sees me and runs over to give me a hug. I pat her on the head and smile down at her. “Have a great first day of school, baby girl.”

She looks up at me, her eyes sparkling with excitement. “I will. Daddy, can we get ice cream tonight?”

I chuckle, ruffling her hair. “We’ll see, kiddo. Now, go have fun in class.”

As I watch her run off, my thoughts go back to Josephine. I can’t shake the feeling that there’s something between us.

I don’t know what it is, but I want to find out.



“You’re late! You know we have a meeting with the shareholders today.”

“My apologies, Theo. It’s Clementine’s first day of school today. I had to go to the meet-and-greet with the other parents.”

“Ah yes, that’s right! I had planned to call little Clem myself this morning and wish her good luck on her first day, but I got caught up with some Excel sheets. Give her a kiss tonight from her Uncle Theo, will you?”

“Of course, and don’t worry, she was so excited to be back at school, she was almost buzzing,” I reply, sitting at my desk and opening my emails.

“So, how did it go?”

“The meet-and-greet? The same as every year, honestly...” Without warning, the image of Josephine Andrews pops into my head—and what a gorgeous, ravishing image it is. Her piercing eyes are as green and enigmatic as the depths of the ocean, and her sunny blonde hair practically sparkles beneath the autumn sun.

I shake my head, trying to clear my thoughts, but it’s no use. Josephine’s presence lingers in my mind like a sweet perfume, and I can’t help but feel drawn to her.

“Jacob? Is everything alright?” Theo’s voice breaks me out of my thoughts.

I clear my throat. “Yeah, everything’s fine. Just thinking about something.”

“The shareholders’ meeting?”

I shake my head. “No, it’s ... you know that woman I told you about who bumped into me in the street a few months ago?”

Theo raises an eyebrow. “Yeah, what about her?”

“Turns out, she’s the literature instructor at Clementine’s school,” I say, a flush creeping up my neck. “And we ran into each other again today. There was something about her ... I can’t explain it. I just feel drawn to her.”

He chuckles, a knowing look in his eyes. “Sounds like you’ve got a crush, my friend.”

I scowl at him. “A crush? I’m a grown man, Theo.”

“Hey, there’s no shame in feeling attracted to someone,” he rebuts.

“It’s not just about her looks, Theo,” I protest. “There’s something more there. A connection, maybe. I just can’t shake the feeling that I *need* to get to know her better—”

“Well, why don’t you ask her out then?” Theo interjects, leaning back in his chair.

“I—well, I tried, but ... we got interrupted.”

He raises an eyebrow. “Well I’m proud of you for putting yourself out there, my friend. What’s stopping you from trying again?”

“I don’t know,” I admit, feeling a sense of vulnerability bubble up inside me. “It’s been a long time since I’ve been on a date, Theo. What if she’s not interested? She’s my daughter’s teacher ... What if I make a fool of myself?”

“Jacob, may I remind you, you’re a billionaire and a single father. You’ve built an empire from almost nothing and raised a daughter by yourself. I think you can handle asking a woman out.” Theo laughs.

“Might I remind you, I haven’t been on a date in a decade.”

Theo chuckles. “Well, there’s no time like the present, my friend.”

I roll my eyes. “It’s not that simple, Theo. What if it doesn’t work out? I don’t want to make things awkward for Clem.”



He nods thoughtfully. “I understand your concern, but you can’t let fear stop you from taking a chance. And who knows, maybe Josephine feels the same connection you do.”

I take a deep breath, considering his words. “Maybe you’re right. I’ll think about it.”

“Good. Now let’s get back to business. We have a meeting to prepare for.”



“You’re late.”

“Funnily enough, you’re the second person that’s said that to me today! And I’m sorry, Clem. Please, believe me, I meant to be here earlier, but my meeting refused to end.”

“I get that. But what I don’t understand is why you *insist* on picking me up from school yourself, Daddy? Isn’t that the whole point of having a butler and a nanny?” she asks.

As always, Clementine is as sharp as a tack—nothing gets past this ten-year-old little girl, which, in all honesty, both impresses me and scares me a little.

“It’s your first day of school, Clem. I wanted to make sure you had a great time! Also, I’d like to talk to one of your instructors.”

“Ah. Alright, then. Which one? I’ll run and get them for you.”

“Miss Andrews. Is she still in?”

My daughter tilts her head all the way back so that she can look up at me from her diminutive stature. Even though it's the beginning of September in Boston, and already late in the afternoon, Clem is wearing a pair of Gucci sunglasses that, I must admit, go shockingly well with her posh, private school uniform. As she stares up at me, she pushes the sunglasses down her tiny nose with a finger so small that I can't help but wonder how it's even real. Her entire face breaks into a wide grin and I realize in this very moment that ... *she knows*.

"Ooh. Miss Andrews? The new literature instructor? The really pretty blonde one?" She wiggles her eyebrows. "Is *that* who you want to see, Daddy?" Her voice is extremely mischievous and it's making me feel beyond guilty.

"Clem, please. You're being silly, and you know it's not like that. It's..." my voice trails off as I suddenly realize that my daughter knows much more about the matters of the heart than I previously gave her credit for.

"*Really?*" She puffs her cheeks adorably. "Then how come you've never asked to speak to Ms. Abadie before, for example?"

"Clem, I simply want to have a conversation with your new teacher. Please, don't turn this into more than it is," I reply, trying to steer my daughter away from the mischievous path she's trotting down.

"Oh, Daddy." She rolls her eyes. "She *is* nice, I'll give you that. If you want to talk to her, she should still be in her office. Second floor, make a right after the big gargoyle statue. Her

office is right there. Take the big stone staircase ... I'll wait in the car, but don't be long, okay?"

I bend down and kiss her forehead, immensely grateful that she exists.

As I enter Jameson Juniper Hall, one of the oldest buildings in Boston, I reflect on the venerable building's early beginnings. The mansion-turned-school was built by a famous banker named Henry P. Jameson, as his luxurious Boston home. It boasts sprawling acres of gardens, grottoes, and verdant fields, as well as four floors and no fewer than a hundred rooms. When Jameson lost the love of his life in a tragic accident, the grieving widower moved out and sold the property to investors who turned it into an elite school for the children of Boston's wealthiest families.

Why Henry P. Jameson needed so many rooms, I'll never understand. Having said that, some of the rooms are rather amazing: a solarium, as well as a glass-encased annex that's now being used as the astronomy building—a place where, as Clem tells me, students love to go and make out.

Funny how teenagers never change.

I find the stone stairs that Clem mentioned and make my ascent, trying to keep a brisk pace while maintaining my composure. Only a few moments later, I can hear Miss Andrews' voice from inside her office.

I knock.

"Yes? Come in..."

“Good afternoon, Miss Andrews. May I talk to you for a moment?”

Her hair is messy and unraveled. This morning, it was very neatly tied at the back of her head. It’s more than obvious that this first day at the school has taken its toll on her. But she looks lovely.

The late autumn sun is filtering through the window behind her, giving her a hazy halo. I find it hard not to stare—her massive, green eyes draw me in like the tides of the sea.

“Mr. Carlton, what can I do for you?” She’s looking at me with a curious expression, her eyes scanning my face, searching for the meaning behind my visit.

“Actually, I have a question to ask you. Just one, do you have any plans this weekend?”

Her soothing eyes are now fixed on me—as if she’s looking straight into my soul. There’s no denying the chemistry between us. It’s palpable, like electricity in the air. I can feel the blood galloping through my veins, and my own pulse beating hard and fast in my temples.

*How can I possibly be this nervous?*

“Mr. Carlton. I meant ... can I do something for you that is *school-related*?” She blushes, diverting her eyes away from me, and attending to a stack of papers.

“Not at the moment,” I press on. “But I was wondering ... if you’d like to go to dinner with me this Saturday?”

She looks up from the stack of papers she's been pretending to straighten, seemingly pondering my question. "I am dedicated to making my first year at Jameson Juniper Hall the best I can possibly make it. I'm sure you understand what that means. Thank you for the invitation, but I must decline. If there isn't anything else...?"

I swallow the disappointment, nodding slowly, still unable to take my eyes off her.

She stands up from her desk, and I'm suddenly aware of how close she is to me. I can smell her perfume and I'm enveloped in her warmth. As I turn to leave her office, she touches my arm. I freeze at the contact—the heat and electricity from her touch coursing through my body. I turn to look at her, and her eyes are fixed on mine.

"Mr. Carlton," she says softly. "I appreciate your invitation, but I have no intention of engaging in anything that might compromise my position as a teacher at this school. I hope you understand."

"Of course, Miss Andrews," I reply, my voice low and sincere. "I respect your decision and your dedication to your job. I apologize if I made you feel uneasy."

She smiles softly at me, and I can see the kindness in her eyes. "Thank you. I appreciate your understanding." She pauses, tucking a stray hair behind her ear. "But should you need to reach out to me at any point, I'm available via the school's email."

As I exit Josephine's office, I am at a loss for words. Her touch on my arm still lingers, and I can still feel the warmth of her body against mine. But I understand her position, and I would never want to jeopardize her career.

"How did it go, Daddy?"

"It could have been better..."

"Well, don't upset her. I have to see her every day, remember?"

"Yes, that's true."

# Chapter Six

## Josephine

“How was your first week at Jameson Juniper Hall?” Emmy asks.

“Yes, yes. Tell us everything!” Larisa chimes in, grabbing a slice of pizza.

My friends are over for our weekly girls’ night. I smile and take a sip of my Diet Coke, settling into the couch.

This new, small space doesn’t seem so uninviting anymore. Being here with my best friends, talking and sharing, makes the new apartment feel like home somehow.

“It’s been great, actually. The students are all so motivated and passionate about literature. It’s refreshing to be teaching in that kind of environment.”

Emmy nods, taking a slice of pizza. “That’s amazing, Jo. I’m so happy that you’re loving your new job.”

“And what about the faculty? Any interesting colleagues?” Larisa asks.

“Oh ... do I have a story for you. So, on the morning of my first day, I had a run-in with the Head of Education, Ms. Abadie. She gives me a hard time for wearing navy blue—said it’s too ‘disco.’”

“Disco?” My friends squeal in unison.

“Yeah ... I don’t even know what that means,” I continue, “but apparently, the color blue is against the school dress code. And—here’s the interesting part—she was supposed to email me the school rules in advance. Conveniently, she forgot, and rumor has it, she did it on purpose.”

“No! Stop!” Emmy says, her eyes as big as saucers.

“Oh, the drama! How do you know this?” Larisa chimes in.

“So, I talked to this other teacher, named Stephanie, who lent me a coat to cover my outfit and she told me that Ms. Abadie basically bullies all the other teachers because she wants to get promoted to Deputy Director or something. So, now I’m convinced that she’s either trying to scare me, or prevent me from chasing the same position.”

“So? What do you care?” Emmy asks.

“I don’t! She can do what she wants. I’m not even interested in that position nor am I interested in school politics. She’s just insane! Or bored. Or both.”

“You should be careful, though, Jo. It sounds like you’ve got to keep your eye out for her,” Emmy replies.

“Maybe once she gets promoted to Deputy Witch, she’ll stop, if that’s all she wants.” Larisa shrugs.



“Maybe. Well, anyway, that’s not even *close* to the most interesting thing that happened on my first day.”

Both Larisa and Emmy lean in closer. “So”—I wiggle in my seat as I prepare for the big announcement—“get this, one of the dads asked me out.”

“Stop! Get out of here!” Emmy exclaims.

“You’re joking!” Larisa adds.

“Why would I be joking?” I laugh as I watch my friends’ shocked faces. “I was just as surprised as you are now but ... it’s true.”

“On your first day as a teacher at a fancy private school, one of those *wealthy* dads asks you out? That’s it. I’m switching careers. I’m becoming a teacher, starting tomorrow!” Emmy says, pounding the kitchen table with her fist.

“Wait, what did he even look like?” Larisa interjects. “Please tell me it wasn’t a dad with a beer belly and a bald spot who could easily play George Costanza in a *Seinfeld* remake...”

Both girls are looking at me expectantly.

“Actually ... he was incredibly attractive. And he just so happened to be the *same man* I bumped into on the sidewalk a few months ago.” My friends gasp in unison as I continue. “His name is Jacob Carlton. His daughter is in my class,” I say, trying to keep my voice level.

The way their faces change when I tell them about my run-in with Jacob Carlton is one of the funniest, and most delightful things that I’ve witnessed in months—and the *exact* reason I

waited to tell them in person, versus putting it in the group text.

“Woah, okay, hold up,” Emmy says, waving her hand. “So, you’re telling me that hot, hot chocolate man is a dad at your school?”

I blush at the mention of Jacob, my mind wandering back to that fateful encounter on the street. “Yes, he is. And his daughter is absolutely delightful. She’s ten years old and so bright. She reminds me of myself at that age.”

A few seconds of stunned silence pass us by and I can tell that they don’t know whether I’m being honest or making fun of them. Their eyes scan my face for the answer. I lift both my hands in the air with open palms, as if I’m about to take an oath.

“And *now* you tell us? You text us every waking hour about silly book details and ... and you couldn’t put *this* in a text?” Larisa explodes.

“I wanted to see your faces.” I grin.

They look at each other as if they still don’t believe a word I’m saying. And it’s not like I’ve ever been known to lie.

“Okay, wisecrack.” Larisa holds up her hands in surrender. “So, when’s the date? What are you going to wear?”

“Do we need to go on a little shopping spree?” Emmy jumps in.

“You know what, you should wear my little black dress, the one I bought a few months ago at Saks. With that shimmering

blonde hair of yours, you'll look like a supermodel in it—”

“Woah, hold on!” I halt them from continuing their excited rant. If the first piece of news was a revelation, this second one will be a veritable thunderstrike. “I’m not going on any date.”

Their mouths are both hanging open in a bizarre, twisted shape that makes me giggle, and I can already see them trying to form more words. But, before they start ranting again, I continue. “Girls, I’m not going on a date with him. I think it’s obvious why.”

“Obvious? Enlighten us.”

“Uh”—I clear my throat—”he’s a *father* of a *student* at my *school*. We have to keep things professional.”

The girls, just as astonished as they are confused, blink their eyes at me.

“Jo, are you seriously going to let that stop you from going out with him?” Larisa asks.

“Yeah, I mean, it’s not like *he’s* your student or anything. And he’s hot!” Emmy adds.

“Come on, guys. It’s not just about that. It’s unprofessional and inappropriate,” I say, trying to reason with them.

“Says whom?” Emmy asks.

*How have they made it this far in life without realizing that some romantic relationships are just not worth the risk?*

*Or am I the only one these days who observes this, apparently, uptight rule?*

“Life is too short to not take risks and have fun,” Larisa retorts. It’s as if she can read my mind.

I sigh, knowing that they won’t let this go easily. “Look, I appreciate your enthusiasm, but I just don’t think it’s a good idea.”

“But you said he looked like a Greek god!” Larisa protests.

“Yeah, and you mentioned his abs!” Emmy adds.

I blush at the memory of Jacob’s toned physique.

“I know, but it doesn’t change the fact that he’s a parent, at the school where I teach. Besides, what if things go wrong?” I ask, trying to make them see reason.

“Jo, you’re overthinking things. Just go out for a drink or two and see where it goes. What’s the worst that could happen?” Larisa asks.

“Exactly,” Emmy chimes in, getting up from the table. “What’s the worst that could happen? Fate obviously brought you two together again for a reason. Are you really going to miss out on *another* opportunity to get to know him?”

I take a deep breath and try to weigh the pros and cons of the situation. Maybe they have a point. Maybe I *am* too uptight and need to let loose a little.

As I ponder the thought of going out with Jacob, my mind starts to imagine all the possible scenarios that could unfold. What if it really was fate that brought us together and we hit off and start dating? What if he turns out to be the one? But then I’m reminded of all the heartbreak with Tom...

*I'm not sure I'm ready to put myself out there again.*

I shake my head, trying to clear my thoughts. "I don't know, guys. I need to think about it."

"Okay, fair enough. But just keep an open mind, okay? After everything that happened with Tom, you deserve to go out and have a little fun," Larisa says, her tone soft with understanding.

"Girls?"

Emmy's voice calls from the living room. She's holding her phone seemingly caught in something that she's reading. I can see her lips and her eyes moving fast across the screen.

"What is it? Is there another sale on toilet paper at Target?" Larisa jokes.

"I think there's something you might like to know about Jacob Carlton."

"What are you talking about?" I ask.

"I just Googled him. And there's actually a lot of articles about him online. He's quite famous, you know."

"Oh, he's married, isn't he? I knew it!" Larisa explodes. "Of course, it was too good to be true."

But Emmy just stares at us from the middle of the living room.

"Jacob Carlton is not just 'regular' rich. He's a *billionaire*."

# Chapter Seven

## Jacob

“Can I come in, Clem?”

“Sure, Daddy!” Her voice is bright and bubbly, as usual.

*Oh to be ten years old and not have a single worry in the world.*

Although I know that thought isn't entirely true—not even for her.

“It's time for bed, darling.”

“Just a half-hour more? Pleeeaaaase?”

“I'm afraid that's not possible. You've got school tomorrow.”

“Ugh ... school.” She pouts. “What do I need school for, Daddy? We're billionaires!”

“And how do you think we got to this position?”

She stops and stares at me, dumbfounded. Obviously, she's never thought about this perspective before. My family did not

come from money—it took a lot of sweat equity and grit to get to where we are today. I joined my father’s meager construction business after college and helped to build it into a multibillion-dollar, national behemoth over the last decade.

“Right ... Well, this semester has not been easy, let me tell you that. I had to do these algebra equations today. Ugly stuff. Ugly!” she says, waving a small hand through the air.

I pull the soft covers up to her chin even though it’s quite warm in the room. It’s part of our nighttime routine—something I feel I need to do. Immediately, she kicks the covers off with her bare, tiny feet.

“What else did you do at school today?” I ask, wanting to savor our time together for a moment longer.

“The usual.” Clementine shrugs and yawns without bothering to cover her mouth.

“Meaning what? Math, I presume. What else?”

Her clever eyes fix themselves on mine. Silently, she raises a small finger to her mouth and pretends to play. “What else? Umm ... let’s see ... chemistry. Dance lessons. Latin. And ... one more thing. But I can’t seem to remember what it was...” she teases me. “What could it have been? My brain is all ... fogged up.” She grins.

“Clem...” I sigh, settling myself beside her bed, not sure whether to be annoyed or not by her game.

“Literature!” she exclaims. “With Miss Andrews ... you know ... the pretty one.”

“Is she pretty? I haven’t noticed,” I lie.

“You’re such a bad liar, Daddy. Honestly,” she says matter-of-factly as if she’s telling me about the weather.

“Do you like her class?” I say, ignoring her comment.

“Of course, I do.” She nods. “Didn’t you love literature class growing up, Daddy? We live in a house full of your old books.”

“I sure did,” I say with a smile and reach for the book on the nightstand. “Anyway, it’s time for me to read you the next chapter of *Moby Dick*.”

“Daddy, look. I can see why you like Miss Andrews ... but I don’t think you have much of a chance with her.”

“Thank you,” I reply sarcastically, which doesn’t escape my daughter’s wit.

“Not unless I *help* you.”

“What do you mean?”

“You know. I’ll keep an eye out for stuff she likes—her favorite flowers, her favorite dessert, movies ... stuff like that. Stuff that girls like that you can buy for her. Daddy, you really are hopeless.”

“Once again—thank you.”

“I’ll want something in return, of course.”

*There it is.*

She’s such a little businesswoman—she takes right after me. Always trying to negotiate and cut a better deal. Now, caught



between laughter and exasperation, I look my daughter in the eyes. “Really? And what would that be?”

“A trip to Disneyland. And tickets to the Taylor Swift concert—with backstage passes.”

*She’s clearly given this some thought.*

“Is that all?” I try not to laugh.

“No. I want to meet BTS.”

“Who? Isn’t BTS the company that installed our air conditioners? Why would you want to meet them?” I ask stupidly.

“Gosh, you’re so old! BTS! The best boy band in the world! The K-Pop group. I want to meet them!” she shrieks.

*My ten-year-old daughter is turning into a teenager right in front of my eyes.*

Still clutching *Moby Dick*, I try to come to terms with this. “Okay, scheming Moe. I think it’s time for you to go to sleep. Enough chatting for one night.”

“But what about *Moby Dick*? I want to know what happened,” she says, lazily stretching out across the bed.

“Fine. But just a few pages, okay? And no interruptions. You need to get your beauty rest.”

“Alright, Daddy. I promise not to interrupt. I love you...” She yawns.

“I love you too, darling. More than anything else in the world.” I open up *Moby Dick* to the page we left off from last

night.

“Oh ... and Daddy? Will you please take me to school tomorrow?” she asks.

“Of course I can.”

I only manage to get through a few chapters of *Moby Dick* before I notice she’s now drifting off. I stop reading and watch her tiny face lose itself in dreams—overcome with gratitude that this perfect little girl is in my life. She’s such a blessing in my life.

Clem starts to wriggle in bed and opens her eyes again. “Why did you stop reading?”

“Because it’s time to sleep, sweetie...”

“No...” she starts to whine, although her eyes are glued shut with fatigue.

“I’ll stay here until you fall asleep. How about that?” I say, gently caressing her hair as she settles into the pillow.

“Mhm ... read me ... the ... book...” And with that last word, she nods off.

I sneak out quietly, gently shutting her bedroom door behind me.

As I make my way across the long, dark hallway, a deep silence engulfs the entire house.

The loneliness I try so hard to ignore, creeps in once again.



I open the door to the Rolls Royce as Clem eagerly jumps in, her pink backpack filled with books and a packed lunch made specially for her by our chef.

I slide into the front seat. “Ready to go princess?” I ask, smiling at her in the rearview mirror.

She nods defiantly with a playful grin across her face as the engine roars to life. “Let’s go! Oh, and Daddy? Put on some Taylor Swift music, please.”

I do as she says, and soon the car is filled with the sound of young love stories set to an upbeat rhythm.

The sun is beginning to rise, and the morning dew twinkles like diamonds on the grass. As we drive through the city, Clem is singing along—loudly—to the songs she loves, and waving to all who pass us by.

“How do you have so much energy every morning?” I chuckle. “It’s like an endless supply of joy runs through your veins.”

Clem shrugs but keeps on singing, her spirit never dampens no matter how long or tiring the night before was. I can’t help but feel proud of my daughter. She truly is a magical little thing.

As we arrive at the school gates, I catch a glimpse of Josephine standing there, waiting to greet the students upon their arrival. She looks breathtaking. Her blonde hair glitters in the morning sunlight as she waves at me with a smile that could light up the entire sky.

I get out and open the door for Clementine. As she jumps out of the car, all eyes are on her—on us. I can feel the stares and hear the whispers, “*Look, it’s Mr. Carlton!*”

Just then I hear a familiar voice above the noise. “Good morning, Mr. Carlton! Lovely day, isn’t it?” Miss Andrews greets me, her eyes sparkling.

I feel my cheeks heat up as I turn to her. “Good morning, Miss Andrews. It certainly is a beautiful day,” I reply, trying to keep the nervousness out of my voice.

Her gaze lingers on me for a moment longer than necessary before she turns to Clementine. “Good morning, sweetie. Are you ready for another day of learning?”

Clementine nods eagerly, grinning from ear to ear. “Yes, Miss Andrews!” She leans in for a hug and my heart swells as I watch them embrace—Miss Andrews’ warm smile radiates with an appreciation for the child standing in front of her—*my* child.

Then Clementine wraps her arms around my waist in a tight hug. “Bye, Daddy,” she says in her sweet little voice before running off to join her friends.

“Bye, sweet pea. I love you!” I call out, but she’s already disappeared into the crowd of students.

“Well, I hope you have a good day, Mr. Carlton. It was really nice seeing you again,” Miss Andrews says, her voice is soft and gentle, but her eyes hold a hint of mischief. I can’t help but feel my heart skip a beat as I look into her eyes.

“Likewise, Miss Andrews. Have a good day as well,” I reply, trying to keep my cool.

As I watch her walk away, I can’t help but feel a sense of longing. Josephine Andrews is the epitome of grace and beauty, and every time I see her, my heart races.

Even more so, seeing her interact with my daughter.

As I drive to the office, my mind replays the way Josephine looked at me. Does she feel the same way I do?

# Chapter Eight

## Josephine

Despite my self-imposed rule against dating the father of a student, I haven't been able to get Jacob Carlton out of my head.

It's not just his good looks or charming personality that have caught my attention. It's the way he interacts with his daughter and the love he has for her that melts my heart.

Clementine is incredibly smart, and her bright smile and infectious energy lights up the classroom. I find myself looking forward to seeing her every day. And I can't help but want to know more about the man who raised such a beautiful and amazing child.

The school is in an uproar today. After the first month of the fall semester, Jameson Juniper Hall is organizing its first parent-student meeting—an Open House. The first of many to come, as I'm told by the rest of the staff.

Ms. Abadie has been organizing this meeting with the precision and military panache of a pit bull. The more I've witnessed this woman go about her business at the school, the more I've come to realize that she reminds me of Trunchbull, the infamous teacher Roald Dahl wrote about in his beloved book *Matilda*. And given the way she treats the other teachers here, I'm sure no one would object to one of the kids putting some kind of frog or newt in her water glass.

Today, the students are restless. Some are happy to have their parents join them for a few hours at school, especially the little ones. While others—the older students—in particular, look put out and even bothered—thinking they're "too cool" to hang out with their mom and dad.

Nonetheless, I'm having a hard time concentrating.

"Yes, Anthony?"

"I don't understand this, Miss Andrews. This ... Is it him, or is it the painting? Or ... is the painting alive? Is this a horror movie like *The Exorcist*?"

"How can it be a horror movie, Anthony, if we're discussing a novel?" I reply patiently.

"But I don't get it..." he whines. "How can a painting ... do things? Unless it's possessed or something! Is this book written by Jordan Peele?"

"*The Picture of Dorian Gray* was written by Oscar Wilde."

"Yeah, I know. But did he, like, copy the idea from a Jordan Peele movie?"

Moments like these really test my patience as a teacher. Not in the sense that I want to lash out, but more so because I have to control my sarcasm and not deliver ironic jabs at students.

“Anthony, the novel was published in 1891. How could the author have copied an idea from a movie when it was written a hundred and fifty years before the movie came out?”

“Miss, I’m just saying. Maybe this Oscar Wilde guy saw one of Jordan Peele’s movies and...”

I turn my back to the class and pretend to wipe the whiteboard even though there’s nothing on it. I just need something to do. After I count to three in my head, I turn around and face them once more.

“Today, as you all know, is the first, parent-student-teacher meeting of the year. Ms. Abadie hopes to see you all, on your best behavior, in the great hall at three o’clock!”

“Ms. Abadie is probably hoping the museum doesn’t figure out one of their mummies is loose in Boston, and comes to find her!” Anthony says and the whole class erupts in giggles.

“Enough of that, please!”

But I have to admit it is quite funny.



The parents have officially arrived. As I look around the great hall, all I can see are Prada bags, Louis Vuitton coats, Chanel hats, Hermes scarves, and a suffocating cloud of expensive perfumes that are slowly giving me a headache.



And also intimidating me a little.

I try to make my way toward the teachers' table at the front, among clusters of parents. They don't bother to move. Many don't even notice me. Though, I suppose to them, I'm just the staff.

"Miss Andrews?" a familiar voice calls from behind.

I turn around to see Jacob Carlton speed-walking toward me with a giant grin on his face, looking more handsome than ever. Dressed in an impeccable dark green suit that highlights his hazel eyes, Jacob is simply the picture of perfection.

As much as I try to keep a level head and remind myself that we are literally in the middle of a school meeting, it's simply too difficult.

He catches up with me and stops short. "Hi!"

"Hello, Mr. Carlton. How are you?"

He seems lost for words and just looks at my face for a moment before answering. "I'm great. I, umm ... I wanted to ... wish you good luck."

"Good luck?"

"Yes! For the ... meeting. The ... in case you address the parents," he stammers, and it becomes obvious that he wasn't ready for this interaction any more than I was.

And it's ... endearing.

"Oh, I won't be addressing the parents. But thank you anyway. Have you found Clementine yet? She should be in the

group with—”

“Miss Andrews!” A cold, stern voice shouts my name. I don’t even need to turn my head to know who it is.

She’s coming our way like an express train ready to blast everything in its path.

“Yes, Ms. Abadie. What can I do for you?”

“I need you to sit by the door.”

“I’m sorry? Sit by the door? I’m supposed to be at the teachers’ table with everyone else. Why would I sit by the door?”

“In case one of the children needs to use the restroom.”

“Umm ... respectfully, Ms. Abadie, we don’t have toddlers at this school. None of the children here need assistance to visit the restroom. They always do it by themselves. Plus, their parents are here. In what situation could I possibly justify going to the restroom with a child?” I ask.

“Sit by the door,” she sneers. Then, lowering her voice, she adds, “At the back of the room, Josephine. Is that understood? Or is this task too difficult for you?”

Without waiting for a reply, Ms. Abadie turns and walks away.

“What just happened? Are you alright, Josephine?” Jacob asks, taking me gently by the elbow. The light touch of his fingertips, and his seemingly genuine care for me, would make

me want to swoon if I was anywhere other than school property. Still, I can feel my cheeks turn hot and begin to burn.

“She’s just ... special,” I say, offering a smile.

“Do you *have* to do what she says?”

“Kind of, yes. She’s the Head of Education.”

“Do you want me to have a word with the Headmaster about her, Josephine?” Jacob asks. I can see it on his face that he truly wants to help me.

“No, no, please! I’ve only been here for a month. How would it look if one of the parents complained about her on my behalf?”

“I suppose you’re right. Then, you know what? I’ll keep you company by the door,” he adds brightly. “I’ll take one of the chairs right at the back and we can sit by the restrooms together. How does that sound?”

“Actually ... that sounds amazing!” I say, thrilled to have someone keep me company through my first meeting at the school. “Wait, but what about Clementine?”

“Oh, don’t worry. She made it crystal clear to me this morning that she’d be sitting with her friends for this meeting.” He grins.

Without knowing it, Ms. Abadie just did me a huge favor. Because despite the fact that Jacob Carlton is *completely* off-limits, I can’t deny that I’m excited to spend even a few minutes with him.

We make our way to the back of the room, where the doors to the restrooms are located. Jacob pulls out a chair for me, and I sit down with a smile, grateful for the unexpected company. “Thank you, Mr. Carlton. You’re very kind.”

“Please, call me Jacob,” he says, his eyes twinkling with amusement. “So, how are you finding the school so far? Aside from Ms. Abadie, of course,” Jacob asks, settling into the chair beside me.

“It’s been great, thank you. The children are lovely, and the majority of the staff has been very welcoming.”

“That’s wonderful to hear,” Jacob replies. “And what brought you to Jameson Juniper Hall?”

“I’m passionate about literature, and have been teaching it for quite some time now. Growing up in Boston, I used to walk by this school and stare at it with admiration. So, when I saw the job opening, I jumped at the opportunity.”

“I’m glad you did.” Jacob smiles. “From what I can tell, you’re doing an amazing job. You have a way of connecting with the children that even some of the most seasoned teachers don’t have.”

“Thank you, Jacob. That means a lot coming from you,” I reply, feeling my heart flutter at the compliment.

“Not to mention, my daughter absolutely *loves* your class.”

I feel a wave of warmth wash over me at his words. “Really? That’s great to hear. Clementine is such a bright and curious student. She really adds value to our classroom discussions.”

“I’m just thrilled she’s excited about literature. It’s been wonderful to see her falling in love with books like I did when I was younger.”

“Ahh, so you were quite the avid reader when you were a child?” I ask.

“Oh, absolutely. My grandfather’s house was filled with books from floor to ceiling. It was always so comforting to me to be surrounded by a thousand stories and opportunities. Whenever I’d feel lost or overwhelmed, I’d go there and just sit in silence between the shelves of books. Somehow it always felt like home.”

Jacob’s words bring a knowing smile to my lips—it seems we both found solace in libraries as children. “I know exactly what you mean. When I was younger, I used to sneak into my parents’ library at night and read until dawn.”

“Really? What did you read?” Jacob asks, intrigued.

“Everything I could get my hands on,” I reply, laughing a little at the memory. “Classics, mysteries, romance novels—you name it.”

Jacob grins at me, revealing his deep dimples. *I love dimples.* “There’s something special about being surrounded by stories, isn’t there? It’s like traveling without leaving your seat.”

“Yes, exactly. Reading allows you to experience things you could never have imagined.”

Jacob nods in agreement. “That’s what I love about reading. It’s a never-ending adventure.”

I can feel the heat rising in my cheeks as we continue our conversation, each topic bringing us closer together. It's easy to talk to Jacob, and I find myself opening up to him. As he speaks, I can't help but notice the way his eyes sparkle in the dim lighting of the room. The way his lips curl into a smile as he talks about his daughter. The way his suit fits him perfectly, highlighting every muscle in his arms and chest.

*He's, without a doubt, the most handsome man I've ever seen.*

We fall into a comfortable silence as the meeting kicks into gear. Our Headmaster, Mr. Thornton, gives a kind speech that is received with deserved applause from parents, students, and teachers alike. Right behind him, I can see Ms. Abadie almost clapping her way off the chair, in her thirst to suck up to him, but Mr. Thornton doesn't seem to pay attention.

"Perhaps this is a reach on my part. But does she have feelings for him?" Jacob whispers to me.

"Honestly, it's hard to imagine Ms. Abadie having a crush on anyone. She doesn't really strike me as the loving type, wouldn't you agree? No, she just wants a promotion. She wants to become Deputy Director."

"Ah, now I understand. But she's such a difficult woman ... Clementine tells me the worst stories about her. Nobody at school likes her. As a CEO, I can't really imagine promoting someone who has the kind of reputation she does."

I smile politely and gloss over the fact that he has just casually dropped into conversation that he's a CEO as if he's

talking about making sandwiches. I try to remain calm and steady, but his quiet sense of power and confidence is making me slowly tremble inside.

“Really? And what does Clementine tell you about me?”

I say these words and realize that I’m flirting with Jacob. And I feel so self-conscious now, my cheeks are burning, and I can only imagine how they must look when bright red. Which only serves to make me even more nervous.

Jacob turns his head toward me and grins. He can see that I’ve gone beet red, no doubt. “She tells me ... hmm ... I can’t say.”

“Why not?” I fall right into his charming trap.

“Well, I can’t say it out loud with all these people around us. Lean in a little closer.”

Without even thinking about what I’m doing, I lean in and almost glue my cheek to his. We’re not actually touching, but I’m so close to his face now that I can feel the heat radiating off him. I can smell his cologne, a delicious blend of dark vanilla, amber, and tobacco. It’s intoxicating and my head grows dizzy with desire. He turns a little more toward me, his mouth dangerously close to mine. I feel his lips forming the words but now I can barely concentrate.

“She says that you’re her favorite. You’re mine as well...”

I put my hand on the back of his chair to steady myself. The room is out of focus for a few seconds. What just happened? We didn’t do anything. And yet ... I feel as if I just had the

most intense experience of my life. My heart is beating faster than a hummingbird's as I straighten myself in my chair and try to catch my breath.

He speaks again but I continue to look forward, deliberately avoiding his gaze.

At the front of the room, sitting at the teachers' table, Ms. Abadie is scribbling in her notepad, furiously. No doubt about the meeting. No doubt.



# Chapter Nine

## Jacob

As my limousine comes to a slow halt in front of Jameson Juniper Hall, I observe an ocean of students occupying the front garden of the school. I get out and begin to look for Clem.

In the crowd, I spot Josephine, sunny and warm as always, directing the waves of children pushing into each other. I make my way toward her, and I can already see a gigantic smile blooming on her face when she notices me.

What I wouldn't give to see this smile every single day.

"Hello, Miss Andrews!"

"Mr. Carlton..." She smiles.

"How was school today? Have you been a Miss Honey or a Ms. Trunchbull?"

As soon as the question leaves my lips, I can see her face change. It's as if a ray of light illuminates her from within and Josephine becomes more alive than I've ever seen her.

“Oh, you know *Matilda*? That’s so funny, I was just thinking about this book the other day!” she says. “That’s such a coincidence.” As she speaks, her sparkling eyes are fixed on mine.

“I don’t really believe in coincidence, Miss Andrews.” I wink at her.

“Is that so? What do you believe in, then ... Mr. Carlton?”

Her suave, dulcet tone of voice makes my insides simmer. All I want to do is wrap my arms around her and whisk her away—as far away from here as possible. Preferably somewhere tropical.

“Fate, perhaps.”

Josephine’s lips curve into a sly smile. “Perhaps you’re right,” she whispers and comes a few steps closer to me.

“Though I must say, while I understand your love of reading, I didn’t expect *Matilda* to be your story of choice.”

I chuckle softly. “Oh, don’t get me wrong, Miss Andrews. I have an appreciation for all kinds of literature. But there’s just something about *Matilda* that draws me in.” I pause, giving her a meaningful glance. “Maybe it’s the way she overcomes the obstacles that are stacked against her. Or the way she uses her intelligence to outsmart those who would underestimate her. Either way, I find her to be an inspiring character. Clem and I read it together a few months back.”

Josephine’s eyes widen in surprise. “You two read books together? That’s so sweet.”

“It’s a part of our nightly tradition. If I’m honest, it can be challenging sometimes to balance work with parenting. So, I’ve always made it a priority to bond with her over a bedtime story.”

Josephine nods, understandingly. “I can imagine it’s not easy being a single parent. But it’s obvious you’re an amazing father—Clem is evidence of that.”

I smile at her compliment. “Thank you, I try my best.”

Josephine leans in closer, her scent intoxicating. “You’re doing a remarkable job, Jacob. Clem is lucky to have a father like you.”

I feel my face flush with heat at her words, and I try to cover it up with a laugh. “Well, I’ll try not to let it go to my head. I don’t want to get too full of myself.”

Josephine giggles, and it might be the cutest sound I’ve ever heard.

“Daddy! Daddy! Look ... Oh, hi, Miss Andrews!”  
Clementine emerges from the sea of students.

“Hello, darling! What do you have there?”

“I got an A on my chemistry test! Miss Harris said I did amazingly well!”

She shoves the test in my hands and then, to my complete surprise, turns around and hugs Josephine. They hold on to each other for a few moments while Josephine compliments Clem and pats her back. “What did I tell you? Didn’t I say that you shouldn’t be nervous? There you go!”

“You’re right!” Clem replies and they high five. “Daddy, we have to celebrate. Can we go to that ice cream place where they put the pink sprinkles on top?”

“Of course, we can,” I reply, still stunned by the intimate interaction between my daughter and Josephine.

“Alright, then I will leave you to it,” Josephine says and smiles sweetly.

For a moment, I consider if I should ask her to come with us, or if Clem might like that. But Josephine answers that question before I even have a chance to address it.

“I need to get home. I have about sixty, long essays to go through from the seniors. And let me tell you ... half of them are from girls who have a crush on that vampire from *Twilight*—even though we don’t study that book in school—and the other half are from boys who want to know why we can’t study Marvel Comics in class. I have my work cut out for me.” She laughs.

“Wow ... I have to say, as a parent at this school, I really thought that the best private school in America was, well ... the best,” I joke.

“It is! But it’s not the school, it’s the students, Mr. Carlton. They never change. You will soon find that out for yourself, just give Clem a few more years,” she says.

I watch her leave and head back inside the school, following the old stone steps, still in awe over the way she and Clem got along just now.

*Josephine cares about my daughter's well-being, even outside of literature class.*

That thought alone makes my heart skip a beat.

Clem and I climb into the back seat of the limousine, relaxing on the soft leather seats.

“Daddy, what’s *Twilight*?”



I amble through the house, my feet echoing quietly on the wooden floor. It’s 9 PM and Clem is fast asleep, so I figured now is as good a time as ever to get caught up on some work.

As I enter my study, I switch on the light and draw back the curtains. In front of me is a large, mahogany desk with leather accents and two plush, red armchairs positioned in front of it. Photos of Clementine adorn the bookcases and shelves that fill three walls of the room.

I take a seat at my desk and begin to sift through the papers scattered across its surface. As I work, my mind keeps wandering back to Josephine. The way she carries herself, the sound of her voice, her quick wit and intelligence, her captivating smile ... even the way she smells—like a mix of lavender and vanilla—drives me crazy in the best way.

I shake my head, trying to clear it of these thoughts. I shouldn’t be thinking about Josephine like this. She’s my daughter’s teacher...

But the more I try to push her out of my mind, the more she seems to infiltrate it...

There's just something about the way she interacted with Clem today that sparked something deep inside of me that I haven't been able to shake. It was like she genuinely cared about Clementine and her success.

And that's *so* attractive.

I let out a sigh, feeling a familiar warmth in my chest that I haven't felt in a while. It's been a long time since I've been interested in anyone like this.

And it's becoming increasingly hard to ignore.

I just wish that I could get to know her better outside of the school environment. But how do I make that happen without it being inappropriate, or putting her in an awkward position?

I need to think of something that won't make her feel uncomfortable or pressured.

Suddenly, an idea pops into my head. I reach for my laptop and open my email. With trembling fingers, I type in her school email address and compose a simple message.

*Dear Josephine,*

*I just wanted to say thank you for everything you've done for Clementine. Your kindness and encouragement really makes a difference and I'm*

*glad that she has such a great mentor at school.  
And of course, it's always great running into you.*

*Should you ever need to reach me to discuss  
Clementine or anything else, please call or text  
(555) 555-0122.*

*Sincerely,*

*Jacob Carlton*

I read the email over a few times before hitting the send button and leaning back in my chair as my message disappears into the cyberspace abyss...

Now all I can do is wait.

Considering the time, I anticipate she won't see it until tomorrow. But to my surprise, only a few moments later, an email notification pops up on my screen. My heart races as I open it.

*Dear Mr. Carlton,*

*Thank you for your kind words. It's always a  
pleasure to work with Clementine and I'm glad  
that I can make a difference in her life.*

*I enjoy seeing you as well. It's apparent you and Clementine have a very special bond.*

*I've saved your contact details and won't hesitate to reach out should the situation arise.*

*Sincerely,*

*Josephine Andrews*

I exhale a breath and lean back in my chair. I can't help but smile to myself, feeling a small sense of victory. I hope she'll allow me the chance to get to know her better, and eventually take her on a proper date.

I type out a quick reply.

*Thank you for responding. I hope you have a good night.*

*Yours truly,*

*Jacob*

A few moments later, another email pops up on the screen.



*The school is organizing a cricket event for the students next Friday. Will you be joining?*

*Josephine*

My heart quickens. *She wants to see me.* I respond, trying my best to keep my excitement contained.

*Absolutely, Josephine. Clem is on one of the teams, so I've been planning to come regardless. I'm assuming you'll be there? If so, I have a whole new reason to come.*

*Jacob*

I hit send, and stare at the screen. Was that too forward? I certainly hope not. Though, I suppose I could be misreading her messages ... It's hard to tell the tone over email sometimes. Minutes feel like hours as I wait for her reply.

*I'll be there. I look forward to seeing you.*

*Jo*

My heart soars as I read her message. I can't believe it. She's looking forward to seeing me. I feel like a teenager again as I eagerly type my response.

*Perhaps I shouldn't confess this, but I'm counting  
down the minutes.*

*Jacob*

I hit send and close my laptop, feeling content. It's a small  
step, but it's progress.

I can't wait to see what the future holds.

# Chapter Ten

## Jacob

“Sir, Miss, please allow me to take you to your seats.”

“I like it when they call me ‘Miss,’” Clem says with a giggle.

She’s behaving extra fancy tonight, no doubt to match the posh energy she is receiving from the staff. We’re having our weekly father-daughter dinner at Clemence, our favorite French restaurant. Clem picks it every single time, partly because it reminds her of a lovely vacation we spent in France, and partly because it sounds a little like her own name. She is ten, after all.

I open my menu and watch, amused, as Clem opens her own. It’s so large that she completely disappears behind it. She can barely handle holding it with her small hands, but I know that she doesn’t want any help from me.

That would absolutely embarrass her.

My daughter is now entering that part of her life in which she is embarrassed by my help. I can't help but feel a little saddened by this. I've always adored taking care of her—from braiding her hair to holding her hand as she skates, to brushing her teeth and tying her shoelaces.

Being a single parent has its unique challenges, but it's the most rewarding thing I've ever done.

I just wish time would slow down sometimes.

“What are you having, Clem?” I ask and watch her tiny face appear from behind the vastness of the menu.

“Bouillabaisse with rouille,” she replies in a perfect French accent. She had a French nanny until about a year ago, when she decided to move back to France. Clem manages to pick up things like this, including the French language and its melody. It makes me look at her in awe.

“That sounds absolutely perfect. I think I'll have the same.”

“No, no. You have to get something different and then we'll swap,” she complains and points the tiniest finger known to mankind at me.

“Alright.” I smile. “Whatever you want, princess. Then I will have the ... Sole Meunière with caviar and white asparagus.”

“Sounds amazing,” she replies, still trying her hardest to be elegant.

A waitress in a red dress arrives to take our order. I've never seen her before, so she must be a new employee.

“Good evening, sir. What can I get for you tonight?”

Before I have a chance to open my mouth, Clem clears her throat. She’s obviously upset that the waitress didn’t say hello to her as well or acknowledge her in any way. To be entirely honest, I feel the same way. “Umm ... I’ll have the Sole Meunière and my daughter”—I point dramatically at Clem, who nods like the Queen of England—”will have the Bouillabaisse.”

“Oh, is this your daughter? She’s so adorable. How old are you? Would you prefer I bring a grilled cheese sandwich?”

“No, thank you. I’ll have the Bouillabaisse. And, please, ask the chef to add a dollop of caviar on top. Thank you,” Clem replies simply.

The waitress in the red dress immediately snaps back into her upright position and looks at me. “She’s a firecracker, isn’t she? I bet she gets that from her father...” she adds languidly, as she allows one of her hands to travel down the side of her body, caressing her curves.

I obviously understand what she’s doing but I feel extremely uncomfortable. Clem is watching closely, and I don’t condone this kind of behavior in front of my daughter.

“That will be all. Thank you,” I say, trying to sound as disinterested as possible.

“Well, if there’s anything you want ... anything at all, just name it...” the waitress carries on. She shoots me a very long,

flirtatious glance, before finally leaving us alone. I feel uneasy and slightly miffed.

“She needs some water, she’s clearly thirsty,” Clem says, and I burst out laughing at her use of Internet slang.

“How do you ... do you even know what that means?”

“That’s what people say. When someone likes somebody else, and they act all ... loopy and crazy like she just did. Thirsty. It’s just a phrase.”

I sip my sparkling water and thank the heavens that my daughter is still the sweet little girl I raised.

“Anyway ... as if,” she continues.

“As if what?”

“As if you would pick her over Miss Andrews. Fat chance,” she replies and sticks her tongue out, seemingly forgetting that just a minute ago she was trying to behave as elegantly as possible.

“Where do you come up with this stuff?”

She doesn’t answer. Instead, she rolls her eyes and I am treated to one of many, many such instances that I know will come in our future.

“Wow ... I had no idea that you’ve become such an expert in matters of the heart, Clem.”

“I’m not an expert. I have eyes. And like everyone else, I use the power of sight,” she quips.

I stifle my guffaw, so much so that I have to cover my mouth so she can't see. "Alright, Miss Wise-monkey. Have you been using your *power of sight* for anything else? You promised me that you would keep an eye out for some things that Josephine likes. How's that little project going?"

"Very well, actually. I was planning on bringing it up soon."

Still trying not to laugh, I watch her clasp her little hands together over the table as if she's getting ready to negotiate with me.

"And what's the hold up?"

"You know exactly what the hold up is. I already laid out my terms and conditions." She stares at me before spelling it out. "B. T. S."

"Oh, yes, yes ... the BTS thing. You know, I've been working on that but they're just so busy right now with the ... traffic and ... roadblocks ... But as soon as the ... airport restrictions lift, I will arrange a meeting." I invent wildly, hoping she goes for it.

She doesn't.

"I see. Well, then. When the traffic at the airport stops," she says, rolling her eyes so hard that they almost fall out of her head, "then you can learn what I know about Miss Andrews. And, believe me, Daddy, it's juicy!"

The waitress in the red dress appears again, carrying our plates. She deposits them and leans against my side of the

table, her hips swaying slightly. She runs a hand through her hair and wets her lips.

“What else can I get you?”

“Nothing, thank you.”

“Are you sure? It can be anything ... anything at all,” she whispers.

“No. Thank you.”

My short and decisive answer seems to do the trick, at least for now. The waitress retreats and I quickly go back to the conversation I was having with Clem just a minute ago.

“What do you mean—*juicy*? Has Josephine actually said anything ... relevant?”

“You bet she did! But ... since you haven’t kept your end of the deal, sorry,” she replies and pops a whole shrimp in her mouth.

“Clem ... come on.”

“No.”

“Please...”

“No.”

“Clementine...”

“No.”

It’s obvious to me that she’s enjoying this game. A lot. “Fine ... I’m sorry about BTS, by the way. I know how much you want to meet them, and I will make it happen. Not because we



have a deal but because I love you. That's all. Now, let's eat our dinner and go home," I say.

There's silence between us now and she seems to be pondering what I just said, not having expected it.

"Daddy, are you lonely?" she asks all of the sudden, taking me by surprise.

"What?" I reply, my fork frozen in mid-air.

"I said ... are you *lonely*?"

I think about her question for a second and decide to answer as truthfully as I can. "Yes ... Clem. To be totally honest with you, I *am* a little lonely. I miss your mommy very much. And there are moments ... moments where I wish I had someone to share my life with—romantically, I mean. I share my life with you, Clem, but it *would* be nice to have a companion."

Clem doesn't reply. Not for a long time, in fact, which starts to worry me a little. Should I continue talking? Explain more things to her? Or have I said too much?

"Miss Andrews' favorite flowers are orchids. She said that she read about yellow orchids in a book, but didn't say which one."

"Thank you so much for telling me that." I smile. "I really appreciate it."

"And her favorite candy is Turkey ... delicious? Is that a thing?"

I laugh and immediately picture a mountain of sugary sweets in my head, brightly colored and mouthwatering. “Do you mean Turkish Delight, by any chance?”

“Yes! That’s it! How did you know, Daddy?”

“Those are the sweets from *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*,” I explain and watch her little face grow more confused.

“The ... what?”

Laughing, I begin to explain to her. “It’s a series of books that I have no doubt Josephine loves. And, you know what, I think it’s time for you to know them as well. You’re old enough to enjoy them. So, what do you say? Shall we order a giant batch of Turkish Delight and start reading *The Chronicles of Narnia* before bed?”

She squeals excitedly and claps her hands together, attracting some odd looks from the other people in the restaurant, but I don’t care.

My daughter is happy, and that’s all that matters to me.

# Chapter Eleven

## Josephine

A knock on the door catches my attention. I abandon the plates I've been washing and rush to open it. My friends are finally here for our weekly girls' night. And it feels like a celebration, because after weeks of unpacking, scrubbing, and polishing, my apartment is *finally* ready.

And it actually feels ... homey.

Either that, or my outlook on this situation has changed for the better.

Lately, I've been wholeheartedly embracing this new "chapter" and looking at the bright side. Because at the end of the day, I have a roof over my head and food in the refrigerator. And that is a blessing, in and of itself.

"Wait until you hear this!" Emmy explodes before she even makes it through the door. "You won't believe what happened to me today at the makeup store."

“Oh, no ... is it your boss again? Is he giving you a hard time?” I can’t decide whether I should laugh or be genuinely concerned.

“He’s more likely to hit on Emmy than to give her a hard time,” Larisa replies, setting three bottles of Prosecco on my dining room table.

“That is a *lot* of alcohol.” I laugh. “Are you planning on getting us all drunk?”

“And what would be the problem with that?” She rolls her eyes. “Do you have anything better to do?”

“As a matter of fact, I do. I have some papers to grade,” I reply, still grinning.

“Perfect! The Prosecco will make grading papers *much* easier—and much better, I might add,” she says matter-of-factly. “Do you have any idea how many times I wished that my own teachers back in school would have been drunk while grading my papers?” She laughs.

“That’s just because you were an absolute nightmare in school, Larisa.”

“You take that back, Josephine Andrews. Just because you’re an instructor at the fanciest, snobbiest private school in America, does not mean—”

“Yes, yes it does,” Emmy interjects. “And let’s be real—you absolutely *were* a nightmare in school, Larisa. You were much more interested in boys than homework.”

“You’re not wrong. But I was just trying to find my soulmate! Because unlike you, Emmy, I’ve yet to find mine...” her voice trails off.

“What?” Emmy guffaws. “What’s that supposed to mean? I’m single, I don’t *have* a soulmate.”

“Girl, you and your best friend Evan were made for each other. I don’t know why you can’t see that,” Larisa declares.

“Evan? No way. I told you guys. We are *just* friends. Now why don’t you sit down and have a piece of cake and a glass of Prosecco.” Emmy grins.

Completely at peace now, Larisa accepts the food offerings and finds a place directly on the floor. We huddle around my quaint coffee table, cozying up on throw pillows.

“So, tell us, what happened at the makeup store, Emmy?” I ask.

“Okay. So, this woman comes in, right? She asks me to give her a makeover and she’s going to film the whole thing and put it on TikTok.”

“What kind of makeover?” Larisa leans in, sipping some Prosecco.

“Well, she wanted a bold, dramatic look,” Emmy replies, grinning mischievously. “So, I gave her just that. I’m talking glitter, shimmer, bold red lips—the whole shebang.”

“And how did it turn out?” I ask.

“Amazing! She loved it. But that’s not even the best part. She has over three million followers on TikTok.”

“Three million followers?” I exclaim.

“Yes! I suppose I’ve gotta wait and see, but I *might* end up becoming a TikTok star overnight.” Emmy laughs. “And if *that* happens, I might finally be able to quit my job at that awful store and become a full-time, freelance makeup artist ... or at least a TikTok makeup artist!” She wiggles her eyebrows.

“Wow ... that’s super exciting! I guess I’ll have to download TikTok if that happens,” I reply, taking a bite of cake.

“I mean, isn’t TikTok for teenagers to dance on, or whatever?” Larisa asks. She’s not a huge fan of social media—though she does have an Instagram for her photography business.

“C’mon, I’ve told you girls—TikTok is so much more than just dance videos. There’s something for everyone. Fitness tips, makeup tutorials—heck, I’ve even learned *finance* tips there!”

“Something tells me TikTok is *not* where you should be going for financial advice.” I laugh.

Emmy rolls her eyes, taking a long sip of her Prosecco. “I’m honestly surprised you haven’t discovered BookTok yet...”

“Let me guess, is that ... TikTok for books?” I smirk.

“That’s *exactly* what it is. And considering how much you love to talk about books every waking hour, I’m confident you would love BookTok.” She nudges me.

“Okay, okay, fine ... I’ll download it.” I hold up my hands in surrender. “As long as you promise you’re not going to peer pressure me into making one of those dance videos...” I laugh.

“I make no such promises.” Emmy laughs.

“So, how have things been for you, Jo? Any news on the hot dad front since the parent-teacher meeting?” Larisa grins.

“Please, don’t call him that,” I reply. I feel a little uncomfortable at this new nickname my friends have given Jacob Carlton.

“Why not?”

“It just ... creeps me out when you guys call him the ‘hot dad.’”

“I prefer ‘hot, hot chocolate man,’ anyway,” Emmy quips.

I roll my eyes. “But to answer your question, yes. There’s ... news...” my voice trails off.

I get a kick out of watching my friends’ faces, as they eagerly hang on to my every word.

“Spill it!” Emmy grins, taking a sip of her Prosecco.

“Well, we exchanged a few emails.”

“Emails? About what?”

“Umm ... well, first he gave me his number—”

“Have you called him?” Larisa interjects, excitedly.

“No, of course not. But ... there’s this cricket match at school on Friday. His daughter, Clementine, is on one of the

teams. So, I wrote to ask if he's coming to watch the match and support her. That's all."

Emmy and Larisa turn to look at each other as they grin and nod in unison. "You asked him out on a date!"

"No, I did *not*. Look, it's not like that. He was going to come anyway. His daughter is on the team, like I said. I just..."

"Just what?"

"Checked to see if he wanted to be there," I reply.

"Shut up. This is a date and you know it!" They laugh.

"Guys, look. You're making a big deal out of this. It was just a few lines and nothing more. He actually said himself that he already knew about the cricket thing. So..."

"Alright, then let me ask you this. Have you sent emails to other parents—to other dads maybe—to see if they plan on coming to this ... cricket whatever?" Larisa asks.

I look around the living room, buying some time for myself.

"Umm ... not ... yet."

They know I'm lying. They're my best friends. Both Emmy and Larisa burst out laughing.

"Ah, I see. So, tomorrow you will send a mass email to every parent asking them to come. Right? Jo ... come on. Why won't you admit it? You asked him out on a date."

"I did not ask him out! It's not even *out*! It's at the *school* where I *work*! I mean, sure I was flirting a little ... but the way you two are acting has me concerned. What happens if



someone else sees the emails and thinks I asked Jacob on a date?”

“Who’s gonna know? If you’re worried about it, just delete the emails,” Larisa says with a shrug.

“I ... can’t. It’s the school’s emailing system, I don’t have that kind of access—to delete stuff, add stuff, create events, you know. That’s just for ... whoever runs the email accounts—HR people, the Headmaster, I don’t know.”

“That’s so stupid. Why would they do something like that? That’s an invasion of privacy!” Emmy says.

“Not really ... we work with children. I suppose that—if something bad happens—the person who does it can’t delete what they did.”

“Okay, so you can’t delete the email. So what? Who even pays attention to this stuff?”

“I suppose you’re right. I’m just a little paranoid, that’s all. Ms. Abadie has been watching me like a hawk—”

*Knock. Knock.*

I jump at the sound. “Did you guys order food for delivery?”

“No,” they say in unison.

I get up, hesitant to answer the door. I wasn’t expecting anyone, and it’s already dark outside.

I peek through the peephole and get a glimpse of one of the wildest, most astounding things I’ve ever seen.

I open the door wide, remaining rooted to the spot.

Along the hallway—from my front door to all the way down the stairs—is a row of men, dressed identically in black and red suits. If I didn't know any better, I might think they're from some organization like the CIA—or that I fell asleep on the couch and now I am dreaming.

“Miss Josephine Andrews?”

“Yes...” I say in a shaky voice.

“You have a special delivery from your secret admirer.” Each of the men is holding a single yellow orchid, which they proceed to hand me, one by one, forming a stunning bouquet, which spreads an intoxicating aroma around me.

I watch in astonishment as a second row of men, this time dressed in black and green suits, emerges from behind the first one, carrying large boxes of ... something.

*Have I hit my head or followed the white rabbit like Alice?  
Am I in Wonderland?*

As if in a dream, all the men bow to me in unison, making my cheeks burn so hot that I'm actually a little dizzy. I thank each of them while I remain rooted to my spot, not knowing what else to say or express besides gratitude. My neighbor, from across the floor, is also now in the hallway—watching the proceedings with curiosity.

“Did you win the lottery?” she asks.

“Kind of...” I grin, thinking about my secret admirer.

“And you bought flowers with the money? You silly girl...”

She shakes her head and goes back into her apartment, slamming the door. I think about leaving some yellow orchids outside her apartment tomorrow morning.

Finally, the procession is over and the last man disappears down the stairs. When I close the door to my apartment, both my friends are staring at me with their mouths hanging open.

“What the heck was that?” Larisa exclaims.

“A special delivery from a secret admirer...” I reply, still in shock.

“What’s in the boxes?” Emmy muses.

“I don’t know, but let’s find out!” I reply, dying to know what’s in the boxes.

I pull one onto my lap and tear it open. It’s a gorgeous, black velvet box, wrapped in silk ribbons. The smell coming from inside makes my mouth water and I recognize it instantly. When I lift the velvet lid, a cloud of powdered sugar rises and envelops my face like a halo.

“Turkish Delight!” I squeal.

Mad with pleasure, I can’t even figure out which piece I want to try first. My fingers shake as I finally choose a pink cube. I dust off a little icing sugar and reveal the transparent goodness underneath. It melts in my mouth as soon as it touches my tongue, releasing flavors of wild roses and honey. “This is, without a doubt, the best thing I have ever eaten.” I savor the sweet right there, on the floor, surrounded by yellow orchids.

“Oh! I’ve got to try it!” Emmy exclaims, grabbing a piece of the Turkish Delight from the box and popping it into her mouth.

“I’m assuming your secret admirer is *the* hot dad?” Larisa asks.

I nod, still in a daze from the unexpected gift.

Larisa grins. “Well, at least you know he has good taste in gifts...”

And then it hits me.

*It was Clem.*

She must have told my “secret admirer” about all of this. Otherwise, how could he have known? I revel and allow the happiness to spread through my body like warm gold.

*Have I ever been this happy before? If I have, I can’t remember.*

I find my phone on the couch. I know exactly what to say to my secret admirer. I scroll until I find Jacob’s number. My fingers are feverish and ecstatic as I type away from memory.

Since he filled my apartment with yellow orchids, no doubt inspired by my favorite book, *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, it’s only fitting that I reply with my favorite quote from the same novel.

The message to Jacob goes through.

*Me: It's enough for me to be sure that you and I exist at this moment. Both of us remain floating in an empty universe where the only everyday and eternal reality is love.*

# Chapter Twelve

## Jacob

“Clem, we’re going to be late!” I call from downstairs for, what seems to be, the millionth time. “What is she even doing up there?” I ask my butler, Jarvis, who, like me, is waiting in the foyer.

“Sir, I wouldn’t be able to tell you, but I’m happy to ask her nanny to go and check.”

“No, no. Don’t worry about it. I’m sure she’ll be down in a moment or two,” I reply, even though I don’t believe my own words. I’m sure Jarvis doesn’t, either, but at least he can’t say anything about it.

As expected, another half hour passes before Clem decides to make an appearance. I spend my time in the library, looking for the book I want to give Josephine. As it turns out, it’s all the way up on one of the high shelves, and I need a ladder to reach it. Just as I climb down, careful not to get dust on my new suit, Clem enters the library, dressed in what I can only describe as a cape made entirely of silver sequins. Instead of

boots, she's wearing sandals and her hair is slicked back and tied neatly with a green bow. Honestly, she looks like an oversized Christmas ornament—the cutest ornament I've ever seen.

“Are you going to your cricket game, or are you planning to steal Christmas?”

“Ha ha. You're so funny.” She smirks.

“Clem, really, though? Why are you wearing that?”

“What?”

“The silver cape. Complete with the bow and sandals. Why are you wearing this special outfit? We need to be at the cricket event in less than an hour.”

“Why are you wearing a red suit? It's a cricket match.”

Well played. Once again, I am defeated by a ten-year-old little girl.

*How in the world did I make a billion dollars?*

“It's not red. It's dark maroon. The tailor said that it goes very well with ... my eyes.”

Clem shoots me a knowing look and grins. “Of course, it does.”

“Anyway, you didn't answer my question. Shouldn't you be wearing something more ... sporty? Like your team uniform?”

“Oh, I'll change into it once I'm there, don't worry,” she adds while admiring herself in one of the window panes.

“Alright, but won’t you be cold? In sandals? And a ... cape?”

“We have a limousine.”

“Fine.” I give up. She’s obviously not in the mood to give any explanations and extracting words from her in this state is more difficult than extracting gold ore from a dried-up mine.

“What are you doing with that ladder, then?”

“Teaching it how to waltz,” I say before I can stop myself. I can see where she gets her sarcasm from. The only thing I hope for is that she doesn’t say this kind of stuff at school. A fool’s hope, probably.

“Any luck?”

“Yes. In fact, I went up to that top shelf to retrieve this copy of *One Hundred Years of Solitude*.”

As if on cue, she asks, “One hundred years of what?”

“I knew you were going to say that.” I grin. “Solitude. It’s another word for loneliness. See, when you told me that Josephine’s favorite flowers are yellow orchids, you also mentioned that she read about them in a book. But you didn’t know which one.”

“Mhm.”

“I did a little digging, even though I already had a hunch. And then ... I sent her a little gift.”

“What was it?”



“Obviously, yellow orchids. And Turkish Delight, just like you advised me.” Clem smiles and nods with appreciation. “In return, Josephine sent me an email with a quotation from a book. Which book do you think it was?”

“I know, I know! One Hundred Years of Lonelitude!”

She claps her hands together, elated that she managed to put the pieces of the puzzle together.

“Solitude.”

“What?”

“Solitude.”

“What did I say?”

“Lonelitude.”

“How is that different?”

“Lonelitude is not a word.”

“Yes, it is.”

“No. The word is loneliness. Or its synonym, solitude. There is no lonelitude.”

“Okay, you are literally saying the same thing,” she whines.

I take a deep breath and carry on. “As I was saying. I want to give this book to Josephine. Would you like to write a little something special on the first page for her?”

Once more, Clem’s face illuminates as she finds this a tremendous idea. She reaches for one of the gold pens on the

service desk in the library and opens the novel. With her tongue slightly poking out, she scribbles.

*Thank you for being my favorite teacher and one of my favorite people in the whole world. Love, Clem*

“How’s that?”

“Perfect, darling. I love it!”

“What are you going to write for her?”

“Umm ... I’m still thinking. So, are you ready to go to the game, then?”

“Almost. Daddy, I have something for you.”

“Is it a matching sequin cape?” I joke but she seems quite serious.

Clem reaches inside the depths of her cape, where I presume there are also pockets and extracts a small box.

“Here you go. It’s a present for you.”

“A present? But it’s not my birthday...”

“It doesn’t matter. You’re the best daddy in the whole world and I want you to have it.”

My heart melts into a puddle at her words. I open the small box and find a pocket square. It’s dark red, the exact same shade as my suit, with a beautiful pattern of small, yellow orchids. I can feel the tears pooling in my eyes, but I try to hold them back.

“How ... how did you even know? How were you able to buy this?”

She grins, obviously extremely pleased with herself. As she should be.

“I asked Jarvis to check with your personal tailor. I had a pocket square made just for you, just for this occasion. Daddy, I really want you to look your best today. I know how much you like Miss Andrews. And I like her too. Perhaps I can’t do *that* much to help but, whatever I can do ... you can count on me!”

I scoop her into my arms and feel as her small fingers caress my face. What did I do to deserve such a daughter? My life would truly be a barren place without her.

“You know, I’m really happy that you chose to wear this sequin cape today,” I say as I’m still trying to fight back the tears.

“Really, Daddy? How so?”

“Because it’s so ... *you*,” I reply, smiling at her. “There’s not a single thing I’d want to change about you, Clem. Not one. You’re just ... perfect!”

# Chapter Thirteen

## Josephine

*A cricket game in the middle of October might not have been the best decision this school has ever made.* I giggle to myself and wrap my soft scarf around my neck for better protection against the wind.

According to the other teachers, this cricket match is supposed to “*strengthen our students’ character.*”

“Hi, Miss Andrews! You look nice today!” A small voice, which I recognize at once, urges me to turn around.

Jacob and Clem are standing hand in hand, both smiling wide.

I try not to embarrass myself, or blush too hard.

“Oh ... hello, Clem! Jacob ... it’s so nice to see you...”

“Hi, Josephine! Have you been here long?” Jacob is wearing a dark red suit that makes his eyes look simply unreal—dreamy and impossibly handsome.

“I came down to the cricket field about ten minutes ago. Clem, you look ... your outfit is *so* special!” I try to find the correct words. The little girl looks like a Christmas ornament, but she is absolutely adorable in her sequined cape and sandals.

“Thank you!” she says.

“But aren’t you cold in sandals? It’s the middle of October.”

“A little,” she replies, wiggling her toes. “It’s fine, though. I want to make an entrance,” she announces in a very serious tone of voice.

“Oh, alright then.” I try to remain serious, even though I can see that Jacob is smirking as well.

“Darling, why don’t you head to the locker room? You should get changed. I’m going to find a seat with Miss Andrews and cheer you on, alright?” He says, kneeling down to her level.

“Sure thing, Daddy!” She reaches her little arms and hugs Jacob around the neck as he kisses her several times on the cheek. Only a few moments later, Clem disappears into the locker room building adjacent to the pitch.

“You know, I tried asking her back at the house why she chose to wear a sequined cape to a cricket match, but she was quieter than the Sphinx,” Jacob says.

After a moment of reflection, I reply, “Hmm... well, I don’t want to alarm you but ... as someone who was once a little

girl, I suspect that Clem might ... have a crush on someone, whom she may be trying to impress.”

“A crush? No ... that’s not possible. Clem is only ten years old. How could she possibly have a crush on someone?”

“Jacob ... it’s common for children her age to develop crushes. In fact, children can develop their first crush at five or six years of age. It’s totally normal!”

He looks at me as if I’ve just told him that the moon really is made of cheese, and we should send a giant mouse into space to eat it. “No ... you’re wrong. She doesn’t have a crush.” He shakes his head comically.

“Jacob ... I know you’re feeling a little blindsided by this. But you don’t have to be. It’s a normal stage of development for any child.” I try to reason with him but he’s still shaking his handsome head in denial, so I decide to divert the conversation in another direction. “Shall we find some seats? Stephanie told me that if we sit on the right over there, we could avoid all this wind.”

“Sure! How about you choose the seats you want, and I’ll get us some popcorn and hot cocoa?” he offers, smiling brilliantly at me.

“This is shaping up to be a wonderful afternoon,” I reply before watching him walk away toward the concession stand.

Jacob stands out from the crowd, and it’s not just because of his impeccable suit, or his incredibly handsome face, but it’s the way in which he carries himself. Almost as if he’s a lion,

used to roaming the jungle and lording over everything and everyone. I realize that I could simply look at him the whole day and never tire of the view.

I eventually make my way toward the bleachers and can already hear Ms. Abadie screaming, even though she shouldn't even be there. I find a cozy little spot in the corner, away from the wind and make myself comfortable.

Jacob appears once more, holding two hot cocoas and some popcorn. "Here you go." I accept the drink and, for a few moments, our hands touch against the hot surface of the cup. His skin is just as warm and inviting. He takes his place in the stands, right next to me, and I can feel his body pressing against mine. It's a scintillating sensation that's as sweet as it is protective.

"I'm glad we're finally getting around to having a cup of hot cocoa together." He winks.

I laugh, feeling like a schoolgirl again. "Yeah, me too."

"Are you cold? Do you want my coat?" he asks, and I'm once again impressed by how gallant he can be.

"No, thank you," I reply, perhaps a little faster than I would have wanted. But I know that wearing Jacob's coat right here, in front of the entire school staff and all the parents who've come to watch their children's cricket match would basically mean exposing me. And exposing *him*.

I could never do that.

“I know that I complimented Clem earlier, but I think you deserve some compliments of your own,” I begin the conversation as casually as I can, even though my heart is racing at the mere thought of being so close to him.

“Do I?”

“I love your pocket square.”

I noticed the silk accessory poking out from his lapel as soon as he arrived. It immediately caught my eye because it’s decorated with a pattern of yellow orchids.

“Oh, this was all Clem’s work,” he says but it’s obvious by the way he’s grinning that Jacob loves the compliment.

“Of course, it is.” I laugh. “And those flowers look ... familiar.” I tilt my head slightly as I look at him, my mind racing back to the beautiful bouquet of orchids he sent me earlier this week. The gesture took me by surprise, and even now, I can’t help but feel a flutter in my chest at the thought of it.

“Ah yes, they’re the same orchids I had delivered to you. I hope that wasn’t too much,” he says with a twinkle in his eye. “I just wanted to brighten up your day a little bit.”

My heart skips a beat at his words, and I can feel a blush creeping up my cheeks. “No, it wasn’t too much,” I manage to say, trying to keep my voice steady. “In fact, it was very sweet of you.”

Jacob’s eyes crinkle at the corners as he smiles, and I find myself becoming lost in his hazel irises. He’s just so



captivating, and the longer I spend in his presence, the harder it is to ignore the growing attraction I feel for him.

The match begins and we watch Clem as she runs across the field, chasing the ball. She's small but agile, and I point her out to Jacob from time to time, who is thrilled by her performance.

The popcorn lies between us, a delicious smell of butter and salt wafting toward me. I reach inside and grab a few, but, to my surprise, my fingers meet Jacob's and we remain there, linked and silent. I'm so thrilled that I'm almost unable to breathe.

"I'm so happy you wrote and asked me to come to the cricket game," he whispers against the wind.

"You would have come anyway, right?" I ask.

"Of course. I would have wanted to see you, no matter what."

His answer takes me by surprise—he's declaring his intentions toward me, openly and with confidence.

I feel a flush of warmth spread across my cheeks and I turn to face him. The look in his eyes is intense, almost smoldering, and I can't help but feel a stirring of desire deep within me.

It's been so long since I've felt this way about anyone, and I had forgotten just how heady it can be.

"I'm glad you came," I reply softly, my heart racing as I realize that I want him, want him in a way that's both exhilarating and terrifying. Because in spite of my best efforts

to suppress my feelings for Jacob, it's become impossible not to acknowledge the pull between us.

As the match goes on, I find myself struggling to focus on anything other than Jacob. I can feel his presence next to me, his body heat radiating off of him, and I can't help but imagine what it would be like to be wrapped up in his arms.

Suddenly, there's a loud cheer from the crowd, and I turn to see that Clem has caught the ball, and is throwing it up in the air in celebration. Jacob jumps to his feet, clapping and shouting, and I can't help but join in.

"That's my girl!" he shouts, beaming with pride.

"You really are the world's best dad, aren't you?" I ask, as we settle back into our seats.

"It's easy when I have the world's best daughter." He winks. It's clear that he loves Clem very much and I find myself admiring their relationship.

As we continue watching the match, I can feel something rising within me. I want to ask him about Clem's mom, but at the same time I'm not sure if it's appropriate.

I finally muster up the courage to ask, my curiosity overwhelming me. "Do you mind if I ask where Clem's mom is?"

He pauses for a moment, his gaze distant as he collects his thoughts. "My wife, Chelsea, passed away the day Clem was born," he finally says, his voice soft and tinged with sadness.

“Her labor was tough ... and then she hemorrhaged. They couldn’t stop the bleeding...” his voice trails off.

The revelation hits me hard, and I can feel my heart breaking for Jacob and Clem.

I’ve never wanted to comfort someone more in my entire life.

It’s hard to imagine how difficult it must have been for him to raise a child on his own while grieving the traumatic loss of his wife.

“That’s terrible. I’m *so* sorry,” I say softly, reaching out to put a hand on his arm.

“It was. But Clem has been my light in the darkness. She’s the reason I’ve kept going. Being her dad has been the greatest gift of my life.” Jacob looks at me with gratitude in his eyes and I feel a sense of warmth spread through me.

“I just can’t imagine how hard it must be,” I whisper, my voice thick with emotion.

“It is,” he says, “but at the same time, I feel like I’m honoring Chelsea’s memory by being the best father I can be to Clem. Chelsea was such a wonderful person, and I want to make sure that Clem knows just how much her mother loved her, even if she can’t be here with us.”

The way he speaks about his late wife is with such tenderness, it’s hard not to be moved. If it weren’t for the fact we are at a school event right now, I would lean into him and

hold him close. But I know that this is not the time or place for such intimacy.

“I’m sure she already knows,” I say softly, hoping to offer some small comfort.

He nods, his expression pensive. “I hope so.”

I can see the pain and the love in his eyes, and it’s clear that he’s a man who has been through so much but still manages to stand tall and take care of his daughter.

It takes a lot of strength to do what he’s done, and I can’t help but admire him for it.

We sit in comfortable silence as the match continues. But our peaceful afternoon is interrupted by more screams from Ms. Abadie, whose anger is currently directed at the school mascot that she’s ushering into the cricket field.

For reasons that I have not yet discovered, the Jameson Juniper Hall mascot is a giant blue and gray parrot. As if that is not weird enough, one of the Seniors usually wears the costume and is forced to walk around the pitch making the best parrot noises he can as he flaps his fake wings sending old and musty feathers everywhere.

Jacob and I, both amused, take in this spectacle for a few moments.

“Given the king’s ransom we all have to pay this school in order for our kids to be able to attend, you would think they might get a better costume for their mascot,” Jacob says.

“I suppose it’s maybe ... a mascot in a more, um, ‘traditional’ style?”

“What tradition would that be? Does this school think that parrots just roam the skies and streets of Boston freely?” Jacob jokes, and I giggle.

He looks at me, and his eyes are so tender and inviting that I almost lose my head. I can feel myself shifting closer and closer to him as we sit on the cold bleacher seats and with each passing minute, I realize there’s absolutely nothing I can do to stop the energy developing between us.

“Oh! This is a disgrace!” Ms. Abadie yells, grabbing our attention once more. “You must take your duties as our beloved mascot seriously!” She scolds the student in the mascot costume, who happens to be a six-foot-four boy who plays for the school rugby team and is roughly the size of a festival port-a-potty. Next to him, Ms. Abadie looks like a poodle. Still, she calls him a child and has been manhandling him for the last half-hour.

“I’m sure she thinks everything is a disgrace,” Jacob whispers in my ear.

I cackle because he’s not wrong.

“Ms. Abadie, maybe if you would just leave me alone for a little while, I’ll lay an egg!” The teenager in the parrot outfit declares as Ms. Abadie gasps in horror, turning a deep shade of purple.

Jacob and I burst out laughing, unable to contain ourselves any longer at the absurdity of it all. As I wipe the tears from my eyes, I notice Ms. Abadie staring at us as if we're naughty children in her classroom and I can see a question forming on her face. I pull myself away from Jacob and put as much distance as I can between us.

Still, she watches us like a hawk.

Even though my conscience is guilt-free, I still feel a bit frightened.

I wish I could shake off this feeling, but an idea keeps poking at me.

*Ms. Abadie may be catching on...*

But before I can dwell on that thought any longer, it's Clem's turn to bat. We watch in awe as she skillfully swings the cricket bat and hits the ball, sending it soaring towards the edge of the field. This little girl has a fierce determination and it's clear she takes after her father in more ways than one.

The crowd erupts into cheers as she runs, determined to score. Jacob and I jump up in unison, cheering alongside the other parents in the stand as Clem scores four runs—the wind in her hair and a wide smile on her face. We wave to her to let the little girl know that we're watching and encouraging her.

I can't help but feel a sense of pride for her, even though I'm just a bystander. Clem is truly something special, she's completely captured my imagination and heart.

Jacob and I high-five each other, giddy with excitement before exchanging a knowing smile, the kind that says we're both thinking the same thing.

Maybe it's the adrenaline from the game, or maybe it's something else entirely, but I don't want this night to end.

*How wonderful would it be if this was my life? My life with an extraordinary man, a lovely little daughter, and so much love shared between the three of us that we could barely contain it?*

# Chapter Fourteen

## Jacob

“Did you see me score out there?” Clem asks, bouncing up and down with excitement.

“You bet I did!” I ruffle her hair affectionately. “You played an outstanding game, Clem! I’m so proud of you!”

“Thanks, Daddy!” My daughter beams up at me, her eyes shining with happiness. “And thank you, Miss Andrews, for coming to watch me play!”

“Of course, I wouldn’t have missed it!” She smiles warmly at Clem and my heart feels like it could burst out of my chest. It’s hard to put into words how nice today was—to be able to share in the excitement of Clem’s cricket match with a woman who deeply cares for her.

*I’ve longed for a day like today...*

“Daddy, do you mind if I have a sleepover at Emily’s house tonight? Her mom is planning to bake cupcakes to celebrate our big win. Brooke and Madeline will be there too.”



“A ... sleepover?” Clem has never asked to sleep over at a friend’s house before, so I’m a bit taken aback by her question.

“Please, Daddy? You know how much I love cupcakes...” she pleads while I do my best to grapple with the fact that she’s old enough to have her first sleepover.

*She’s growing up and it’s about time for her to start experiencing new things.*

It’s as if I can hear Chelsea’s voice in my head. And although it pains me to come to terms with the fact my little girl is quickly becoming a pre-teen, I’m also keenly aware I’ve got to let her have a little independence.

I knew this day would come eventually, I just didn’t expect for it to be sprung on me quite like this—or to have to go through these milestones and make these types of decisions all on my own.

Josephine touches my arm, as if giving me gentle reassurance. I can sense her support, and I’m grateful for it.

*I suppose it’s time to let my little girl have her first sleepover...*

But before I can respond, Clem continues, “Besides, if I go, you’ll have the *whole* evening to yourself. You can ... go to dinner ... maybe catch a movie...” She wiggles her eyebrows.

*Ohhh! So that’s what this is about.*

I chuckle at her antics. “Okay, okay, sleepover it is. But only if Miss Andrews agrees to come with me to dinner and a movie.”

Josephine looks at me with surprise. “Oh, I don’t know about all that, I don’t want to impose.”

“No, no, not at all,” I quickly reassure her. “I would really appreciate your company if you’re up for it.”

Josephine looks at me with a hint of suspicion in her eyes, but it quickly fades away and she nods her head. “Sure, why not? It sounds like fun.”

Clem jumps up and down in excitement, hugging both of us tightly. “Okay, Clem, looks like you’re having a slumber party. But let me talk to Emily’s mom first to make sure everything is okay.”

Clem jumps up and gives me a hug. “Thank you! This is going to be the best night ever!”



After dropping Clem off at her friend’s house, Josephine and I head to a cozy Italian restaurant downtown.

We stop and admire some of the historic buildings along the way. Boston is one of the oldest cities in the United States—the brick buildings nestled in between modern glass skyscrapers make for a charming view that I never tire of.

“I’ve always loved this part of the city,” Josephine says as we make our way down the quaint cobblestone street.

“What is it about old buildings that attract us so much?” I ponder aloud.

“Hmm ... maybe the history? The sense that so much has already happened to generations of souls before us who walked through these streets and left a mark on these very walls?”

“You should write literature, not just teach it, Josephine.”

“That’s very flattering. You know, my parents named me Josephine after the character in *Little Women*—Josephine, or ‘Jo.’ That’s what her sisters call her and that’s what my friends call me.”

“Should I call you Jo as well?” I ask, in a low and soft voice.

She looks up at me, her eyes meeting mine, and for a second we just stand there, looking at each other. There’s a spark between us, something unspoken and electric.

Then she smiles, breaking eye contact. “You can call me whatever you’d like, Jacob.”

I feel my heart race at the sound of my name on her lips. It’s been so long since I’ve felt this kind of attraction to someone.

It’s almost overwhelming.

When we arrive at the restaurant, we’re shown to a cozy corner table with candlelight casting a soft glow across our faces. The dim lighting and soft music creates a romantic atmosphere, and I can’t help but feel a sense of excitement to finally have a chance to get to know Josephine outside of Jameson Juniper Hall, and the prying eyes of the other parents and teachers.

The waiter greets us and takes our drink orders before disappearing to the kitchen. Josephine looks breathtakingly beautiful tonight, and I can't help but stare at her. She seems to notice and blushes, looking down at her menu.

“You're gorgeous, Josephine Andrews.”

Josephine looks up from the menu and meets my gaze, a small smile playing on her lips. “Thank you. You're not so bad yourself.”

I feel my cheeks flush at her compliment. This woman, with her quick wit and gentle nature, has me completely enthralled. I can't remember the last time I felt so comfortable and yet, so nervous, around someone at the same time.

As the waiter delivers our drinks and takes our food order, I can't help but wonder what Josephine is like outside of her job as a literature instructor. What are her passions? Her fears? What does she want out of life?

“Can I ask you something?” I begin, taking a sip of my wine.

“Of course,” she replies.

“What made you want to become a literature instructor? Is it something you've always known you wanted to do?”

Josephine takes a moment to consider her answer, her eyes staring off into the distance as if she's lost in thought. “To be honest, it wasn't always my dream to be a teacher. I started out as an aspiring writer, but I decided to pursue teaching as a more stable career path.”

I listen attentively as she speaks, fascinated by her honesty and vulnerability. “Have you ever published anything?” I ask, genuinely curious.

She shakes her head, a small smile playing on her lips. “I had essays published during my time at Harvard, but nothing beyond that. Writing has become more of a hobby for me now, but I haven’t given up hope that one day I’ll publish something. In the meantime, teaching literature allows me to share my love for stories with others.”

“And if you were to one day pursue writing as a full-time career, what kinds of stories would you want to tell?” I press, eager to learn more about the woman sitting across from me.

Josephine’s eyes light up with passion, and I can tell I’ve struck a chord. “I’ve always been drawn to stories that explore the complexity of human relationships. Stories that delve into the intricacies of love, loss, and the beauty and pain that comes with being alive. I want to write stories that make people think and feel something, to hopefully make a difference in the world. Or at least help someone feel less alone in their struggles.”

“That’s a beautiful goal,” I say, my heart swelling with admiration for her. “I would love to read something you’ve written one day.”

“I’ll hold you to that,” she says with a teasing smile, and we both laugh. “What about you, Jacob? What made you decide to become a businessman?”

I smile at the question, taking a sip of my wine. “I suppose it was in my blood.”

“Do tell.”

“Well, my father started a construction company when I was about eight years old. I watched him work day and night to build it from the ground up and provide for our family. We weren’t wealthy by any means, but we were comfortable. I watched him work tirelessly throughout my whole childhood to save up just so I could go to college—in fact, I’m the first person in our family tree that ever went to college.” Josephine listens intently, nodding along as I speak. “I wanted to make sure his sacrifice and hard work paid off, so I went to school, studied hard, and began working alongside him right when I graduated, with the goal of growing his construction company so he could retire early and live the life he deserves.”

“And?” Josephine raises an eyebrow, waiting for my response.

“And, well, I started diversifying the company’s portfolio and investing in different industries, and before I knew it, we were one of the most successful companies in the country,” I say, smiling. “But it wasn’t just about the money for me—I wanted to provide for my family in the way my father provided for me, and to do some good in the world. Dad has since retired, and is living his best life with my mother. I’ve been Chief Executive Officer of the company ever since.”

Josephine nods, a knowing look in her eyes. “That’s admirable. It sounds like you have a strong sense of family

and a desire to give back.”

I smile, feeling a sense of warmth at her words. “Yes, family is everything to me, especially Clem. She’s the reason I continue to work so hard, to make sure she has the best life possible.”

“I have no doubt she appreciates all you do for her,” Josephine says, with a reassuring smile.

One that makes me want to be vulnerable...

“You know, lately, if I’m being completely honest, I don’t quite feel ... *enough* for her anymore.”

“Enough? What do you mean?” Josephine asks.

“It’s just that ... well, she recently told me she wants a mom, because all her friends have moms.” I sigh, doing my best to push down the sudden wave of inadequacy washing over me.

Josephine reaches out and takes my hand, giving it a gentle squeeze. “Jacob, I can only imagine how hard it is to be a single parent. But I hope you know it’s natural for Clem to want a mother figure in her life. And that doesn’t mean you’re any less of a parent. The love and dedication you have for your daughter is evident in the way you talk about her and the things you do for her. You are more than enough.”

Her words bring a sense of comfort to me that I didn’t even know I needed. I can’t help but feel grateful for her support. “Thank you,” I say, looking into her eyes. “You’re right. Sometimes it’s hard to remember that.”

Josephine smiles at me reassuringly. “It’s okay. We all need reminders from time to time,” she says softly, squeezing my hand. There’s something about her touch that sets my senses ablaze.

I smile at her. “Thank you, Jo. That means a lot to me. And I must say, I believe Clem looks up to *you* as a role model.”

Josephine blushes at my comment, and I can see a hint of a smile playing on her lips. “Well, I’ll do my best to live up to her expectations.”

“I have no doubt you will.”

Our food arrives, and we begin enjoying the delicious meal and each other’s company. The conversation flows easily between us, and I find myself opening up to Josephine in ways I didn’t expect. We talk about our pasts, our hopes for the future, and everything in between.

The more we talk, the more I realize how much we have in common. Beyond our mutual love of literature, we share the same morals and values and both have a strong desire to help others and make a positive difference in the world.

I learn about her love of travel, and her obsession with collecting coffee mugs from every new place she visits. I learn that she’s an avid Gilmore Girls fan and has weekly girls nights with her two best friends. I learn about her favorite fictional characters, and what books she’s read over fifty times.



I find myself getting lost in her green eyes, the way her lips curve into a smile when she talks about something she's passionate about, the way her hair falls in soft waves around her face, the gentle sound of her laughter.

By the end of the meal, I feel like I've known her for years.

And I don't want this night to end—which is why I texted my personal assistant to make special arrangements for us.

# Chapter Fifteen

## Josephine

“Where are we going?” I ask as we step out of the restaurant and into the cool night air.

“You’ll see. It’s a surprise,” he replies with a grin before taking off his jacket and offering it to me. “Here, put this on. I don’t want you to get cold,” he says, his voice warm and comforting.

I slip on the jacket, enjoying the scent of his cologne that still lingers on the fabric. “Thank you,” I say, snuggling into the coat.

“My pleasure,” he replies, a small smile on his lips.

As we walk, Jacob tells me about his favorite classic movies and how he used to watch them with his parents every Sunday. I listen intently, hanging onto his every word.

We finally arrive at a small theater that looks straight out of the 1920s. Jacob leads me inside, and I’m immediately transported to another time. The theater is beautifully

decorated with gold and red velvet curtains, plush seats, and a stage in the front.

“What is this place?” I ask, in awe.

“It’s a private theater that I own,” Jacob says with a smile.

“What? This is *amazing!*”

“I like to come here to watch movies when I need to get away from work or just need some alone time with Clem. But tonight, I thought it would be perfect for us to have a private screening of your favorite movie.”

I look at him in disbelief, feeling touched by his thoughtfulness. “You know my favorite movie?”

“Well, I had a little help with that one.” He winks.

“Ah, yes, of course. Clem *did* ask me about that. She’s a sneaky one, isn’t she?”

“She sure is ... she literally parent-trapped us into this date tonight, but I’m not complaining.”

I can’t help but laugh at his reference to *The Parent Trap*, where the twin daughters scheme to force their parents to go on a romantic dinner date.

“I’m definitely *not* complaining.” I smirk.

He leads me to a small room in the back of the theater, where there is a big screen and a comfortable couch. The lights are dimmed, creating a cozy atmosphere.

Jacob disappears briefly and comes back a few moments later with an assortment of candy and two glasses of wine.

“What’s your go-to movie theater candy?”

I smile at him, feeling like a teenager on a first date. “Reeses Pieces.” I chuckle.

“Excellent choice.” He grins, handing me a king-sized box of Reese’s Pieces.

He walks over to the projector, clicking a few buttons before the screen comes to life. “Ta-da!” he exclaims with a grin.

“Wow. This is incredible! Thank you, Jacob ... for everything...” I say, feeling overwhelmed by his kindness.

He smiles at me, his eyes warm. “Anything for you, Jo.”

The opening credits of *Pride and Prejudice* start to play, and I feel my heart swell with happiness. It’s been my favorite movie for years, and I can’t believe Jacob took the time to set up a private screening just for us.

I tuck my feet up under me on the couch, and Jacob sits down next to me, so close that I can feel his warmth seeping into me. His arm brushes against mine, sending shivers down my spine. I glance at him, and he meets my eyes with a small smile on his lips, before entwining his fingers with mine. I feel a flutter in my stomach as his hand rests on top of my own.

*Could this night get any better?*

As the movie continues, I slowly start to relax, and I realize how much I needed this. I needed someone to take care of me, to make me feel special, to remind me that life can still be beautiful, even after heartbreak.

And Jacob does just that.

He takes care of me in ways that no one else has ever done.

The space between us is crackling with unspoken energy. Our connection feels palpable, and I can't resist the urge to move closer to him. Jacob responds by wrapping his arm around me, pulling me close so that my head rests on his chest. I can hear his heartbeat, steady and strong.

*It feels like ... home.*

As each minute passes, I find it harder and harder to concentrate, my mind too consumed with him. I look up at him and our eyes lock.

I see the desire in his gaze, and I know that he feels it too.

“Josephine, I know we haven't known each other very long, but there's something about you,” he says, his voice low and husky. “I haven't been able to stop thinking about you since the moment I saw you.”

My heart skips a beat. “I feel the same way.”

“But what about your job? I don't want to do anything to jeopardize your position at the school.”

I know he's right, but at this moment, I can't seem to think about anything else but him. “I'll figure something out,” I say. “My friends seem to think I'm being paranoid about the whole thing, anyway...” my voice trails off.

Jacob leans in closer, his lips hovering dangerously close to mine. “Good, because I don't know if I can resist you any

longer,” he murmurs, his hot breath caressing my skin.

“Then ... don’t,” I whisper before parting my lips in anticipation.

Jacob doesn’t hesitate, closing the distance between us and capturing my lips with his. I feel a jolt of electricity, my body responding to his touch in a way that surprises me. His kiss is gentle at first, exploring, savoring, but it quickly becomes more urgent, more desperate. It sets off fireworks inside of me. I wrap my arms around his neck, deepening the kiss as our tongues dance together.

He tastes like red wine and a hint of mint, and it’s intoxicating.

I melt into him, relishing the feeling of his strong arms around me. All that exists is the two of us, lost in our passion. It’s like we’ve been waiting for this moment our entire lives.

Jacob moves his hand to my cheek, holding my face gently as he continues to kiss me. I savor the feeling of his lips on mine, the way his touch ignites a fire within me—as if trying to imprint this memory forever in my mind.

Eventually, we pull away, breathless with our eyes locked together. I can see the raw desire in Jacob’s eyes, and I know he can see it in mine too.

“Jo, I don’t want this night to end,” he says, his voice husky.

“I don’t either,” I reply, my voice barely above a whisper. Jacob stands up and extends his hand, pulling me up from the couch.

“Come on,” he says, a mischievous grin on his face. “Let’s make the most of this private theater.”

I’m not sure what he has in mind, but I trust him completely. With a quick nod, I take his hand, and we make our way to the front of the theater. There’s a winding staircase leading up to the roof. Jacob takes my hand and leads me up the stairs to a small rooftop garden, secluded and peaceful. The scent of blooming flowers fills my nostrils, and I feel like we are in our own little world.

Jacob turns to me, his eyes sparkling with mischief. “Have you ever danced under the stars?” he asks, pulling me close to him.

I shake my head, my heart racing with anticipation. “No, I haven’t. But I’d love to.”

Jacob takes my hand, pulling me into his embrace. His strong, muscular arms wrap around me, and I feel like I’m melting into his warmth. The sound of soft music starts to play, coming from a hidden speaker. Jacob sways us gently to the rhythm, our bodies moving together in perfect harmony under the sparkling stars.

*This feels like a fairy tale, and I can’t believe that it’s really happening.*

I let myself get lost in the music and the moment, feeling his body close to mine, his breath warm against my skin. We dance for what feels like hours, moving together in perfect harmony. It’s like we were made for each other, and, at this moment, nothing else matters. All of my worries and fears

fade away, replaced by a feeling of joy and contentment that I've never experienced before.

Eventually, the music fades and we come to a stop, our bodies still entwined.

I look up at Jacob, my heart full of love and gratitude. "Thank you," I say softly. "That was magical."

He smiles at me, and his gaze is tender as he brushes a lock of hair away from my face. "It was my pleasure," he replies before gently kissing my forehead. "It's late, Jo, I should probably take you home."

I nod, appreciating his concern for my well-being, but also wishing that we could stay here forever. He wraps his jacket around me again and takes my hand in his, interlacing his fingers with mine.

We walk out of the theater in silence, both lost in thought, until we reach his car. Jacob opens the door for me, and I slide into the passenger seat, feeling a bit sad that our date is coming to an end.

As he starts the car, I turn to him. "Thank you for such an amazing night. I don't think I can ever repay you for this."

He chuckles, running a hand through his hair. "You don't have to repay me. Just being with you tonight was everything I could have asked for and more."

During the drive, Jacob turns up the radio, and we sing along to our favorite songs. I feel lighthearted and carefree, as if



nothing in the world could bring me down. When we arrive in front of my apartment building, he walks me to my door.

We stop in front of it, and I turn to face him, feeling a sense of nervousness about what comes next.

“Thank you again, Jacob,” I say, breaking the silence. “Tonight was perfect.”

“I’m glad you enjoyed it, Jo. I had a wonderful time too,” he replies softly. “Can I take you out again next week?”

I smile, feeling my heart flutter in my chest. “I would love that,” I say. “Just tell me when and where.”

“Great,” he says, his eyes alight with excitement. “I’ll think of something special.”

We stare at each other for a few seconds, and I can feel the tension building between us. I’m not sure what to do or say, but before I can think further, Jacob’s lips are on mine again.

This time the kiss is searing, as if he’s trying to convey all his emotions through it.

I give into my desire, wrapping my arms around him, reveling in the feeling of his strong muscles against my body. His hand finds its way to the small of my back, pulling me even closer. I can feel the warmth of his body against mine, and it’s almost too much to bear.

I part my lips for him, inviting him in, and he does not hesitate to deepen the kiss. His tongue expertly explores my mouth, and I moan softly, my body igniting with desire. His

fingers lace around the nape of my neck, sending shivers down my spine, and I melt into his arms.

The kiss continues for what seems like hours, until I'm gasping for air. Then, slowly, he pulls away, his lips still hovering close to mine.

"I ... I better go," he says softly, his eyes smoldering with desire.

I nod, still too overwhelmed. We stand there for a few moments more, neither of us wanting to break the spell.

As if sensing my thoughts, Jacob pulls me in for one last kiss, then he reluctantly pulls away. "Until next time," he whispers.

I watch him walk away, feeling my heart swell with joy in a way I haven't felt in a long time. He turns around and says "I'll call you tomorrow."

I give him a shy smile and nod. "Okay."

"Good night, Jo." I feel the butterflies flutter in my stomach.

"Good night," I say back, a smile playing on my lips.

As I close the door, I can still feel his lips on mine. I press a hand against my chest—my heart is racing.

For the first time in a long time, I feel truly alive.

# Chapter Sixteen

## Josephine

“Are you up for a hot cocoa?” I ask Stephanie, as I hand her a paper cup from the vending machine in the hallway.

“Oh absolutely! I could take a bath in this stuff.” Stephanie jokes.

“Believe it or not, I’m pretty sure this school has the best hot cocoa I’ve ever had in my life.” I laugh.

“Oh I believe it.” Stephanie chuckles. “This stuff is made with real chocolate, imported from *Switzerland*. It’s one of the many perks of working for a school that charges parents tens of thousands of dollars, per semester, for their children.”

As we make our way back to my office, cups in hand, my mind wanders back to the events from this weekend. “Hey, Steph. I wanted to talk to you about something.”

“Shoot!”

“I kind of have the impression that Ms. Abadie ... doesn’t really like me.”

“She doesn’t like anyone, hon. I think someone saw her yelling at a puppy once.” Stephanie laughs.

“No, that’s not what I mean. I kind of get the impression that she’s got something against me ... on a personal level.”

“Really? How so?” Stephanie asks.

“Well, at first there was the whole mess with the dress code, and the email that she ‘conveniently’ forgot to send me. Then at the parent teacher meeting, she made me sit by the restroom door, as if she didn’t want me to be seen as a teacher at the school...” my voice trails off, as I consider if I should mention the cricket match.

Stephanie sips a little more of her hot chocolate. I can tell she’s pondering.

“Yeah, that does seem strange. You know, Ms. Abadie bullies everyone because she wants the—”

“Head Deputy job, I know!” I interject. “Ugh ... I’m so tired of that. And if that’s really the case, I don’t understand it because I’m not even remotely interested in the Deputy Director position. In fact, I don’t even think I *qualify* for it. I don’t have enough years of experience to be given a position like that. I wouldn’t even be able to apply if I wanted to.”

“That’s a fair point,” she replies.

“Plus I’m new here, so if anything, I should be the *least* of her concerns. Tenured instructors are more likely her competition, right?”

“That’s probably true...” her voice trails off.

“So, then what is Ms. Abadie so worried about?”

“Well ... maybe it’s got something to do with the fact that you’re the exact opposite of her in every possible way.” Stephanie grins.

“What does that mean?”

“Come on, Jo. You know what I’m talking about. You’re young. You’re beautiful and kind ... all the kids *love* you. The other teachers—the men I mean—stare at you when you pass in the hallway. Do you really think that a woman like Ms. Abadie can deal with that? I bet she hated you from the first moment you set foot in this school.”

“But that’s ... ridiculous,” I say.

“No, that’s Abadie.”

“You know, I’ve seen her staring at me a few times. At the parent-teacher conference she even seemed to be taking notes. Do you think she might be keeping tabs on me?”

I purposefully avoid telling Stephanie about Jacob.

But that doesn’t mean I worry less.

“Honestly, I don’t know. But what could she possibly be writing down?” Stephanie asks, rolling her eyes.

Obviously, my interactions with Jacob, I think to myself.

“I don’t know...”

“Jo, look. I doubt Ms. Abadie has anything to report on you. But you should watch it, nonetheless. She’s not the kind of person you want to mess around with.”

“Thanks Steph. I appreciate you listening,” I say as we finally reach my office. As I open the door, I notice there’s a box on my desk—it appears to be a gift. And I have a hunch I know exactly who it’s from. “Hey Steph, I’m going to grade some papers if you don’t mind.”

Stephanie nods and heads down the hallway as I lock my office door and make my way to the box. It’s wrapped in silver paper with a yellow bow. There’s an envelope neatly attached to it. I carefully open it to reveal a handwritten note.

*Dear Jo,*

*There are many things I could write here to try to dazzle, or impress you. But I only want to say one thing, a confession.*

*I like you—so much.*

*I haven’t been able to stop thinking about you since the day we met and, frankly, I don’t want to stop.*

*Will you please accept my invitation to dinner this Saturday at 5 PM?*

*Yours always,*

*J.*

*P.S. Please enjoy this small token of my gratitude  
for all that you are.*

My heart flutters as I read the note for the second time, trying to absorb every word. I look at the box, still curious about its contents, and slowly unravel the paper before lifting the lid to reveal a first edition copy of *One Hundred Years of Solitude*.

I can hardly believe my eyes. This book is my all-time favorite, and this edition is a rare find. It's worth a small fortune.

I run my fingers over the cover, feeling the silkiness of the paper under my touch. I take out the book and gently turn the pages, reveling in the familiarity of the words.

That's when I spot the handwritten notes from both him and Clem on the front page.

*Thank you for being my favorite teacher and one  
of my favorite people in the whole world. Love,  
Clem*

*Thank you for awakening my soul. Love, Jacob*

Tears of joy stream down my face at the sight. This is the most thoughtful gift I've ever received.

I've never felt so understood.

I reach for my phone and tap out a quick message to him.

*Dear J,*

*I would be delighted to join you for dinner Saturday at 5 PM. Thank you for the wonderful gift, it's one of the best I've ever received.*

*Yours,*

*Jo*

Just then I see a figure through my office door window. My heart races as I quickly hide the gift under a stack of papers, and jump up from behind my desk. I don't know what Ms. Abadie wants, but I have a feeling it's not good.

I take a deep breath, unlock and open the door.

"Ms. Abadie, can I help you with something?" I ask, trying to sound cordial.

"I hope so, Miss Andrews," she replies with a sneer. "I just wanted to remind you that the deadline for student progress reports is coming up next week. I hope you're not slacking off like you usually do."



I grit my teeth, trying to keep my composure. “Actually, Ms. Abadie, I’ve already submitted my reports. I made sure to do it on time.”

She looks surprised for a moment, but then quickly recovers. “Oh. Well, I hope it’s up to our standards. Also, *don’t* lock the door to your office during school hours, it’s against school policy.”

With that, she turns to leave, but not before giving me a once-over, her eyes lingering on my desk. I can tell she’s trying to figure out what’s underneath the stack of papers.

As soon as Ms. Abadie is out of sight, I let out a sigh of relief. It’s clear that she’s not a fan of mine. But I’m not a fan of hers, either.

I take a moment to compose myself before pulling out Jacob’s gift from under the papers on my desk. I run my fingers over the spine of the book, feeling the weight of it in my hands, before tucking it into my bag for safekeeping.

The rest of the day passes in a blur. I feel like I’m in a dream. By the time I make it back to my apartment, I’m practically floating on a cloud, humming to myself as I unlock the door.

The sound of my phone buzzing snaps me out of my reverie, and I glance at the screen to see my Mom’s name.

I take a deep breath before answering. “Hi, Mom!”

“Josephine, darling, how are you? I haven’t heard from you in a while!”

“I’m doing well, thanks for asking. Just caught up in teaching and gra—”

“So, did you hear?” Mom asks, not even bothering to let me finish answering her first question.

*Here we go.* “What?”

“Tom is getting married!” The tone of her voice is difficult for me to pinpoint. She announces to me that my ex-boyfriend is getting married with something between glee, spite, and a good dash of *I told you so*.

“I’d prefer we don’t talk about my ex-boyfriend anymore, Mom.” I sigh. “It’s making me uncomfortable,” I announce calmly.

“I’m just saying, that could have been you, Josephine! He was clearly ready to settle down. But you walked away!”

“Mom, he was cheating on me,” I say, feeling so immensely tired all of the sudden. My mother and I have had this conversation countless times over the last several months. At this point, I think the Guinness Book of World Records could give us an award for our achievement.

“It was a mistake, Josephine. I don’t understand why you couldn’t just look past it. You could have had a great life together. He’s a trust fund baby after all. He’s every woman’s dream and you let him slip from your fingers.”

I sit in silence, not able to believe the words that just came out of her mouth.

“Mom, I refuse to have a loveless marriage. I would pick being single a thousand times over being with a man who doesn’t respect me.” I try to remain as calm as possible, but there’s a drum pulsating hard in my ears as if a marching band has descended on top of my head. “As for paying the bills, I am perfectly capable of doing that myself. Just in case you’ve forgotten, I graduated top of my class at Harvard, all my work and my essays have been published and praised, and I have a position as the literature instructor for the best private school in the country.” I recite the list to her, feeling more and more empowered as I speak.

“Oh, please! Won’t you just stop it with that? You spent four years reading novels. That’s not college, that’s a hobby! And now, you’re putting your silly career before a man who could have provided for you if you would have just been willing to look the other way.”

“Provided for me?! Tom has never worked a day in his life—not because he couldn’t, but because he refused. Not to mention, he’d squander away his money every month and then mooch off of me, always promising to pay me back, but never once following through...”

*It’s about time she knows everything that happened between me and Tom.*

“What are you even talking about? He has his own family’s money to spend. Tom is a wonderful young man! And he’s very rich—”

“Nothing about Tom was *wonderful*,” I cut her off. “In fact, Tom was awful. I only stayed with him for so long because you gaslighted me into believing that he was the best I could get. But guess what mom? I don’t need Tom. Being with a trust fund baby was *your* dream, not mine. I’m perfectly capable of providing for myself. I don’t need to hide beneath the shadow of a man. Certainly not one who doesn’t respect boundaries or the sanctity of marriage.”

“I will not stand here and watch you throw mud at Tom like this.”

“Mom, Tom *cheated* on me. With the same girl he’s now marrying, mind you. Then he left me high and dry. How can you defend him? How can you be so blind? Are you in love with him or something?” My patience has finally run out.

“How dare you say such things about your own mother.” My mother is clearly just getting started on her rant, but I’ve already had enough.

“Mom, I have spent my entire life trying to make you proud. But it’s clear nothing I do will ever be good enough for you. I’m sorry that I’m not living the life you envisioned for me, but I am happy with the way things are. I have a fulfilling career, wonderful friends, and a chance at true happiness. I am done living my life for your approval. Goodbye, Mom.” With those words, I hang up the phone and let out a deep breath, feeling a weight lifted off my shoulders.

I have a desire to deconstruct what just happened, to get to the bottom of things. But doing it would be like swimming to

the bottom of a deep and dark lake. It might look like a good idea to the well-intentioned explorer, but within are monsters waiting to grab you. Perhaps it's best we let these monsters lie low, sleep even, and disappear with the tides.

All I know is, I'm so glad I'm no longer beholden to my parents' expectations. I'm no longer settling for less than I deserve to appease them. And I don't need their approval to be happy.

I have my own life to live, my own story to write.

And it just so happens that on Saturday night, I get to write a new chapter with Jacob.

# Chapter Seventeen

## Jacob

“I’m going to need you to put this on,” I explain, pulling the blindfold out of my jacket.

“Wait, is this some sort of hostage situation?” Josephine laughs.

We’ve been cuddled up in the back of my limousine for about thirty minutes, but we’re closing in on the top-secret location of our date. I’ve spent the week meticulously planning this date specifically for her, and I can hardly wait to see her face when she realizes where we’ll be eating dinner tonight.

“I just don’t want to spoil the surprise.” I wink. “Do you trust me?”

She looks at me with those captivating eyes, a hint of mischief playing around the corners of her lips. “I do.”

“Good. Because I promise, this will all be worth it.”

She nods, still grinning. “Okay then, blindfold me.”

I carefully tie the black silk scarf around her eyes, making sure it's not too tight. Then I reach over to take her hand, squeezing it gently.

It's a short drive, and before long, I help Josephine out of the car and lead her forward a few steps before stopping her.

“Ready?”

“I was born ready,” she replies, and I can hear the excitement in her voice. I gently remove her blindfold and watch as her eyes flutter open, taking in the sight before her.

“Ta-da!” I say, pointing with both hands at the gray house behind me.

The house is old and some of the wood sidings are starting to chip in places, but it's wonderfully charming. There's a narrow green door and a romantic window, high in the attic.

“Um ... what am I looking at? And where are we?” Josephine asks as she looks around.

“Shall I let you guess, or should I tell you ... Jo?”

“Jacob ... is this ... what I think it is? Could it be? No ... please, tell me! Are we ...” She gasps, taking my hand.

“Yes! Jo, welcome to the place where it all started. This is Louisa May Alcott's Orchard House. It's the place where your very name comes from,” I say, kissing her hand, which is now trembling.

“Jacob, this is ... it's unbelievable. This is the actual house in which Louisa May Alcott not only lived, but this is where

she wrote *Little Women*. And I'm standing right in front of it!"

"I've booked the museum for the entire evening, just for us. Would you like to go inside?" I grin, offering her my arm.

She stares at me in awe, before taking my arm in hers. Just then, she looks up at me and kisses my cheek. My heart flutters at her touch, and I savor the warmth of her lips on my skin. "Thank you, Jacob! This is the best and most wonderful surprise I have ever received in my entire life."

"You're welcome, Jo. You know, I had wondered if you've ever been here," I tell her as we make our way inside the old house. "I couldn't ask you, so I just had to risk it."

"No, I've never been. I knew it was here, of course, so close to Boston. And I've seen pictures of it, while I studied *Little Women* in college. But I guess it was just meant for us to come here together."

As we step inside, we're greeted by the sight of the Alcott family's original period furniture and artifacts. Josephine's eyes light up at the sight, her hands tracing the edges of the antique bookshelves and chairs.

"It's like a dream," she murmurs, her voice full of wonder.

I can't help but smile at her reaction. Watching Josephine marvel at the history and significance of this place makes it all the more special. We wander around the museum, arm in arm, exploring every corner of this historic house.

I'm entranced by Josephine's enthusiasm and passion for literature.



It feels like we're inside a fairy tale. The soft glow of the lamps, the smell of old books, and the cozy atmosphere are so surreal. We stop in front of the fireplace, warming our hands as we chat about the history of the house and our love for literature.

I can't help but notice how close we are standing. The heat of the fire is nothing compared to the heat I feel emanating from her body. I reach out and brush a strand of hair behind her ear, tucking it away from her face.

"You have a speck of ash on your cheek," I say, my voice low and husky.

She leans in closer, her face inches away from mine. "Can you get it for me?" she asks, her eyes locked on mine.

Without hesitation, I lean in and gently wipe the ash away with my thumb. Our faces are now so close, I can feel her breath on my lips.

"Jacob," she whispers, and before I can react, she presses her lips to mine.

It's like an explosion goes off inside of me. I wrap my arms around her waist, pulling her in closer as our lips move together in perfect rhythm, each kiss more intense than the last.

We're lost in the moment, in this historic house, surrounded by the ghosts of literary giants. I can't help but feel like this is a moment that we'll both remember for the rest of our lives.

I kiss her deeply, tasting the sweetness of her mouth, as my hands trace the curves of her hips. She moans softly against my lips, her body pressed tight against mine. It's like nothing else exists in the world, just her and me, lost in desire and passion.

Eventually, we pull away, and catch our breath. She looks up at me, her eyes sparkling with desire. I can't help the smirk that spreads across my face. "You know, I never would have guessed that I would end up kissing you in Louisa May Alcott's house," I say, my voice laced with humor.

Josephine laughs, her head thrown back in joy. "Life is full of surprises, Jacob. And this ... this is definitely the best one yet."

"Well, the night's still young." I smirk. "Are you ready to see what's next?"

Josephine looks at me with a twinkle in her eyes. "I don't know if I can handle any more surprises, Jacob. You've already taken my breath away with this one."

"Well, I hope you can handle it, because I've got a private dinner planned for us in the garden. Just you and me."

Her mouth drops open. "You *are* full of surprises, aren't you?"

I take her hand and lead her out the back door into the garden. We follow a candle-lit path to a small table surrounded by flowers, with a view of the moonlit sky. I pull out a chair

for her and she sits down, still in awe of everything that's happened tonight.

“Jacob, this is just ... amazing,” she says, looking around at the beautiful scenery.

“I'm glad you like it,” I say, sitting down across from her.

The wait staff start to bring dish after dish and plate after plate toward us. All of it is lined on a serving table next to ours.

“Blancmange!” Josephine calls out, pointing toward the dish. “This is the treat that Meg made for Laurie in the book when he was sick!”

“Very good, Josephine! Ten points!” I laugh. “Tell me, what else?”

“Mmm ... gingerbread! Oh, they always have gingerbread in the book. All kinds. And they're all here. Look at that! Gosh, it smells ... delicious!” she says, leaning in and taking a whiff of the aroma wafting above the plate. It's an array of sugar, molasses, spices, rum, and, of course, ginger.

“Fantastic! Another ten points!” I clap. “What else do you recognize?”

“Well, the turkey, of course. Bread, all the vegetables, the chicken. What is on that plate?” she asks, craning her neck.

“That would be seed cake. To be honest, I have no idea what it is.” I chuckle. “The private chef presented me with the menu a few days ago, but I simply don't know. And over there are the candies. They're supposed to be...”

“Chocolate drops and bonbons?” She completes my sentence.

“Of course. You’re really good at this, Josephine.”

“What can I say? This is one of my favorite books, after all...”

The wait staff continues to bring more dishes and Josephine recognizes the seafood from the book. Fish balls, oysters, as well as lobster salad, and the famous currant jelly that simply refused to jell for the characters in the book.

As we eat, Josephine’s eyes are bright with excitement as she talks about her favorite scenes from the story.

“It’s just so inspiring to see these women, these sisters, making their way in the world. They each have their own struggles and challenges, but they overcome them together. It’s such a beautiful story of family and sisterhood,” she says, taking a bite of the gingerbread.

“I agree,” I say with a smile. “So, tell me more about your family, I’d love to know more about what made you the woman you are today.”

Josephine puts down her fork, brushing a stray crumb off the corner of her lips. “Well, I grew up in a pretty traditional household. My father worked and my mother was a homemaker. But my grandmother lived with us before she passed away, and she was a big influence in my life. She was a writer herself, and she taught me to love and appreciate literature from a young age by reading to me every night

before bed.” Her eyes light up as she speaks about her grandmother with admiration

I nod, listening intently to her words. “She sounds wonderful.”

“She was,” Josephine says with a wistful smile. “She was my biggest supporter ... and I miss her every day.”

I reach across the table and take her hand, giving it a gentle squeeze. “I’m sorry for your loss,” I say softly.

Josephine smiles gratefully at me, her eyes shining with unshed tears. “Thank you, I know she would be proud of the woman I’ve become ... even if my parents aren’t.”

I furrow my brows, sensing that there’s more to the story. “What do you mean?” I ask her gently.

Josephine lets out a sigh. “My parents don’t exactly approve of my career choice,” she admits. “They think that teaching literature is a waste of time ... and that reading is nothing more than a hobby.”

I can’t help but feel a surge of anger on Josephine’s behalf. “Well, I disagree with them. You’re doing something important, Jo. You’re shaping young minds and introducing them to the wonders of literature. That’s something to be proud of.”

Her eyes widen at my words, and she squeezes my hand in gratitude. “Thank you, Jacob. That means a lot to me. It’s just that ... I’ve recently had to come to terms with the fact that nothing I do will ever be good enough for them. They only

want to see me get married and have kids. They consider me a failure because I'm twenty-nine and single.”

I press my lips together, trying to think of something comforting to say. But before I can, Josephine speaks.

“You know that night I bumped into you in the street? You said something that really resonated with me. Do you remember what it was?”

“Sometimes it's the things that break us that make us stronger,” I reply.

“Yes!” she exclaims. “That night, I broke. I hit rock bottom when I found out my boyfriend of six years was cheating on me with a random girl. And what's worse? I had been supporting him financially—while he had a trust fund all along that he squandered away every month trying to impress his friends.” She pauses, her voice trembling with emotion. “My mother had no clue he was mooching off of me. And when I told her she just ... didn't care. About any of it. In fact, she's convinced that I missed my chance to marry *her* idea of a wonderful man.”

I reach out and take both of her hands in mine. “I am *so* sorry you went through all that with your ex. You deserve so much better. You deserve someone who will love and appreciate you for the incredible, successful, intelligent, beautiful woman that you are,” I say firmly, feeling my own heart pounding in my chest as I speak. “And just in case nobody has ever told you—you are enough, Jo. Your value is not determined by your relationship status. You should never

be made to feel like a failure because you haven't settled down yet. You've accomplished so much, all on your own, and nobody can ever take that away from you."

She blinks back the tears in her eyes, a smile of genuine appreciation on her lips. "That's exactly what I've come to realize. For the first time in my life, I'm genuinely happy with the way things are and not worried about what anyone thinks of me," she says, her voice barely above a whisper. "I may not have the kind of life my parents want for me, but I'm finally living the life I want for myself, apart from my parent's rules and expectations. And I'm *so* proud of the woman I'm becoming."

I smile, admiring her courage and determination, and press a kiss to her knuckles.

"I'm glad to hear that. And I must say—I'm so impressed by you, by how much you've overcome, by the way you radiate strength and determination. I admire the woman that you are. You're *worthy* of love. Not because of anything you've done, but because of who you are. I hope you know that—and not just know it—I hope you *believe* it. You deserve all the joy and happiness in the world."

Josephine blushes at my words, a small smile tugging at the corners of her lips.

"Thank you, Jacob. For everything, truly," she says softly, her eyes locked with mine. "You've made me feel so seen and heard. I'm not sure *anyone* has shown such kindness to me in my entire life. I'm just so humbled and honored that you took

the time to discover and learn about what I like, and what's important to me. Something so small as a book that I like—you turned it into an experience that, I promise you, I'll never forget for as long as I live. I hope you know how much I appreciate you. You're an amazing man and an incredible father. I feel truly blessed to have met you, and am in such awe of you.”

There's a moment of silence between us, the air charged with an unspoken tension. I can feel the heat rising in my cheeks and it's at this moment that I realize...

*I think I'm falling in love with this woman...*

The realization hits me hard, making my heart race and my breath catch in my throat. I've never been one for love at first sight or quick infatuations, but there's something about Josephine that draws me in.

Maybe it's her intelligence, her kind heart, or her fierce independence. Or maybe it's the way her eyes light up when she talks about the things she's passionate about. Whatever it is, I can feel myself falling deeper and deeper under her spell with every passing moment.

“Jacob,” she says, breaking the silence between us. “Is everything okay?”

I shake my head, realizing that I've been staring at her for far too long. “Yeah, sorry...” I clear my throat. “I was just lost in thought.”

Josephine quirks an eyebrow. “Lost in thought about what?”



I pause, wondering if I should confess my feelings to her. But before I can decide, one of the waiters approaches. “Can I pour you some beef tea?” he asks.

I nod, grateful for the interruption. The last thing I need is to pour my heart out to Josephine right now and make things awkward between us. “Please,” I say to the waiter.

As he pours the hot liquid into our cups, I steal a glance at Josephine. She’s watching in awe.

“They used to drink this in the 1800s and it appears in the book, as well. I can’t wait to try it,” she says.

I smell the familiar aroma of roast beef, which is now made unfamiliar as it is liquid and served in the finest porcelain cups on this side of the Atlantic, before taking a sip. “Oh, this tea is...” I struggle to swallow.

“Terrible.” She laughs.

I chuckle along with her at her blunt assessment of the beverage. “Yeah, it’s not exactly my cup of tea,” I say, a grin spreading across my face at my own pun.

Josephine giggles, her eyes shining with amusement. “I love a good dad joke.”

“It’s one of my favorite parts of fatherhood.” I smile.

At my words, Josephine looks away, her fingers playing with the tablecloth. She’s quiet for a moment before she speaks. “I can’t wait to have a family of my own one day,” she says wistfully, taking a sip of water. “With the right person of course,” she adds.

“Of course,” I say, trying to keep my voice even.

Because the truth is, I hope to be that right person for her.

“I can’t wait to give my kids the kind of life I never had—filled with unconditional love, laughter, and adventure.” Her eyes sparkle as she talks about her future family—it’s obvious how excited she is at the prospect of having children of her own. And it warms my heart to know that despite everything she’s been through, Josephine still has faith in the power of unconditional love and believes in having a family of her own one day.

“That sounds wonderful,” I say softly, reaching out to cover her hand with mine.

We fall into an easy conversation and I find myself laughing more than I have in a long time. And every time she laughs, every time she brushes her hair behind her ear, every time she bites her bottom lip in concentration ... I fall a little harder.

# Chapter Eighteen

## Josephine

“Stop it! Just let me...”

“But it hurts!”

“I know, but if you stop wiggling, I can...”

“Emmy, Larisa, play nicely.” I joke as I walk into the living room, carrying a tray of hot cocoas.

“But she’s torturing me!” Larisa cries out.

“Torturing you? You wanted me to do this!”

“Yes, but I didn’t want you to wax my legs *off*! It feels like you’re ripping my skin!”

“Okay, you know what? I’m through with this. You can have the rest done at a salon. And if the lady there puts up with this nonsense and whining and yelling, you can tell her, from me, that she’s a saint. But I, for one, am done!” Emmy throws her hands in the air in a very dramatic fashion and pushes the warm tub of wax away from her. It slides across the wooden floor and stops against the opposite wall.

“But I have a date tomorrow! Am I supposed to show up with one hairless leg while the other looks like it belongs to a woolly mammoth? He’s gonna think I’m turning into a werewolf in the middle of dinner,” Larisa complains as she checks her legs.

“You mean—turning *back* into a werewolf.” Emmy smirks.

“Finish my legs, please!” Larisa whines.

“You’re starting to sound like one of the little girls in my class,” I say before tossing a piece of licorice at Larisa, laughing. “Here, bite down on this and keep quiet.”

They both nod absentmindedly and Emmy finishes the job. I cover my own legs with a warm blanket and enjoy the atmosphere. A frosty evening, snacks as far as the eye can see, endless hot cocoa, and my best friends seated around the coffee table watching *Gilmore Girls* reruns.

“So, spill the beans. How was your date yesterday with Jacob?” Emmy asks.

I feel a blush creep onto my cheeks at the mention of Jacob’s name. I clear my throat before answering her question. “It was wonderful, actually,” I say with a soft smile. “He took me to Louisa May Alcott’s house for dinner.”

“Who the heck is Louisa?” Larisa asks.

“Only one of the greatest American female authors of all time,” I reply, rolling my eyes at Larisa’s lack of literary knowledge.

“And he took you there for dinner? Goals,” Emmy says with a grin.

“It was amazing, really,” I say dreamily. “I felt like I was in a fairy tale, surrounded by all these books and history. But the best part was spending time with Jacob. He’s kind, intelligent, and funny. I even opened up to him about Tom and my parents and he was so understanding and supportive. I feel like we just click, you know?”

Emmy and Larisa exchange knowing glances before turning to me with identical grins on their faces.

“You like him,” they both say in unison, causing me to blush even harder.

“I do,” I admit, feeling both nervous and exhilarated at the same time.

“Hot, hot chocolate man for the win!” Emmy laughs.

I roll my eyes, but I can’t deny that I’m just as excited as my friends are. Jacob has been on my mind nonstop since the day of the cricket match. Dinner last night at Louisa May Alcott’s house was simply icing on the cake.

I can’t believe how easy it is to talk to him, and how he just gets me in a way that no one else ever has. He’s so supportive and encouraging, which is something I’ve never experienced in a relationship before. Not even with my own parents.

It’s like he can see into my soul, understands my grief, and then offers me words of comfort when I need it most. He did it last night and he did it when I was just a stranger who bumped

into him on the sidewalk. Jacob makes me feel seen and cared for ... maybe for the first time in my life.

“Well, it’s about time you found someone who treats you right,” Larisa says, giving me a playful nudge. “You little rule breaker, you.”

“The only rules I’m willing to break are my own archaic ones.” I laugh.

But just then, like a ton of bricks, it hits me.

### *The Rule Book.*

Stephanie gave me a rule book on my first day of school—the same rule book Ms. Abadie conveniently “forgot” to send me.

*Why didn’t I think to check it sooner?!*

I hop up and rummage through the enormous stack of papers and files on top of my desk. It’s got to be here somewhere. Although, it might have gotten buried when I unpacked the rest of my moving boxes because I can’t seem to find it. I check the desk drawers.

“What are you doing?” Emmy asks.

“Looking for this!” I hold up the large book, triumphantly. “The school rule book! I completely forgot about it until now, but surely, there must be something in here about this whole situation. Let’s see...” I flip through the pages until I find the section on personal conduct, desperate to find solace that there’s no official rule against dating a parent. “Ah, here it is.”

“What does it say?” Emmy asks, leaning in to read over my shoulder.

As I read, my heart sinks. “No employee shall engage in romantic relations with a student or the parent of a student.” I feel my stomach drop. I can’t believe I hadn’t thought to check the stupid rule book before now. I mean, they forbid the color blue, *of course* they don’t allow teachers to date parents.

I should have trusted my instincts on this one.

*How stupid can I be?*

I stare down at the page, trying to come up with a solution.

“Oh no,” Larisa says, picking up on my anxiety.

“What are you going to do?” Emmy asks, concern etched in her features.

“I don’t know,” I say, feeling tears well up in my eyes. “I don’t want to lose my job, but I don’t want to lose him either.”

“Why does the school even care?” Larisa asks, anger flaring up. “It’s not like he’s a student and you’re *his* teacher!”

“Rules are rules,” I say, feeling a lump form in my throat. “No wonder Ms. Abadie has been watching my every move. She probably is building up a case to fire me. First it was the color blue ... and now *this*.”

“I’m so sorry...” my friends say in unison.

“Are you actually considering giving up on him?” Emmy asks, putting a comforting hand on my shoulder.

“You two have something special. You can’t just let it go because of some stupid rule,” Larisa adds.

I take a deep breath and wipe away the tears that have started to fall down my cheeks. She’s right.

I can’t just give up on Jacob.

But what am I supposed to do?

“Well, Jacob won’t be a father at your school *forever*. I imagine that his daughter will graduate at some point and then you two would be free to be together, if that’s what you both wanted, of course.” Emmy’s simplistic and ultra-positive view of life actually makes me smile.

“I like this loophole,” Larisa adds.

“His daughter is ten years old. She still has eight more years before she graduates. Do you really think he’s willing to wait that long?”

“Okay, then how about this? What if you just marry the handsome billionaire and then you wouldn’t even have to worry about where you work or how you’ll pay your rent? How about that?”

I shake my head. “Are you suggesting I should just give up my career? You both know how hard I worked to get to where I am—and all the education it took. Are you really suggesting I should throw it all away just because I met a guy who has a lot of money and can pay my rent? Is that who I am? I’d be no better than Tom...” my voice trails off.



Both Larisa and Emmy become silent. The only noise is coming from the street traffic outside, as each of us are lost in thought.

I finally break the silence. “Look ... Jameson Juniper Hall is not just any school. It’s the best and most elite private school in America, and one of the best in the whole world. Do you know what that means?”

“That they give the kids an extra slice of pizza for lunch?” Larisa jokes.

“It means that, as far as my career goes, this is *it*. They don’t give opportunities like this more than once to teachers. I’m *extremely* lucky to have even been hired at Jameson and I know that. Considering how hard Ms. Abadie came down on me about the color blue, I would most likely get fired if I went against school rules and dated him. Not to mention his daughter is involved. The other parents could absolutely turn against me and against his daughter, accusing me of favoring her, making her life miserable ... do I really need to explain myself more?”

“Wow ... I never imagined it was *that* serious,” Emmy says as she sips her hot cocoa. “I guess I thought it would be more of a slap-on-the-wrist kind of punishment.”

“No. Definitely not just a slap on the wrist. And let’s say I did get fired. What other kind of job could I possibly do? I’m not trained for anything else.” I sigh.

“I mean, you could finally write that novel you’ve been dreaming about,” Emmy points out.

“We need to be realistic about this. Life is not a movie. It’s not some fairy tale in which I’m Cinderella, and a handsome billionaire prince comes and sweeps me off my feet on a white horse.”

“But it could be...” Emmy sighs.

*She’s not wrong.*

A life with Jacob *could* be a fairy tale.

But it’s simply not in the cards for me if I want to keep my job and the livelihood I’ve worked so hard to rebuild after my breakup with Tom.

I sip my hot cocoa once more and watch the TV screen, but I don’t feel like paying attention anymore.

# Chapter Nineteen

## Jacob

I stare down at the “ *Good Morning* ” text message that I sent to Josephine over eight hours ago. This is the longest she’s ever taken to respond and I can’t decide if I should be worried or not. Surely, she’s just busy. It’s Monday, I would assume Monday is the busiest day for a teacher, but I don’t know. Something is nagging at me that it’s more than that...

“Hey Jacob, do you have a minute?” Theo pops his head through the door of my office. He’s carrying a stack of folders, as well as his laptop and tablet.

“Of course, come in, Theo.”

“Great, I just wanted to pass along the numbers from our accountant. Our profit margins are up and we should be able to expand our charity outreach program this year.”

“That’s fantastic news. We’ve been talking about expanding that program for months now.”

“Agreed. We’re up fifteen percent from last year, so we should be able to make a significant contribution before the year ends.”

“That’s great, thanks for letting me know.”

“Of course. Oh, and I wanted to ask you, how was your date with Josephine this weekend?”

My heart skips a beat at the mention of her name. I can’t help but smile as I think back on our weekend together. Who knew Louisa May Alcott’s house would be the backdrop to the most perfect date?

“It was really great,” I reply, unable to keep the grin off my face. “She’s an extraordinary woman.”

“That’s fantastic! I’m really happy for you, man. It’s great to see you finally putting yourself out there.”

“Yeah...” my voice trails off as I’m reminded that she hasn’t responded to my text today.

Theo’s face scrunches up as he notices my sudden shift in mood. “Is everything okay?”

I debate whether or not to confide in him about it. I feel a little silly being *this* concerned over one unanswered text. But Theo *is* my best friend, he’s been with me through everything—he’s practically family at this point.

“I’m just a little worried. Josephine hasn’t responded to my text from this morning.”

Theo's face softens and he leans forward. "Maybe she's just busy. You know how crazy her job can be."

I nod, trying to convince myself that he's right. But I can't shake the feeling that something is off. "I know, but it's not like her to not respond at all. I just hope everything's okay."

Theo leans back in his chair, looking thoughtful. "Have you tried calling her?"

"I haven't yet. I didn't want to come across as too needy or pushy."

"Hey, it's better to check in and make sure everything's okay than to spend the whole day worrying. Just give her a call."

I nod, realizing that he's right. I should check in on her. I pick up my phone and dial her number, my heart racing as it rings.

"Good luck," Theo whispers, before exiting my office.

After a few rings, she finally answers.

"Hey, Jo, it's Jacob."

"Hi, Jacob," she responds, her voice sounding a little distant.

"I'm just calling to check in. I haven't heard from you today. How are you?"

"I'm sorry about that. I've just had a lot on my mind today."

"Is everything okay?" I ask, concern lacing my voice.

There's a moment of silence before she finally speaks. "No ... unfortunately. I—I didn't respond to you this morning because I've been trying to work up the courage to tell you..."

“Tell me what?”

“Well, I found the school rule book last night. And, well ... turns out, Jameson Juniper Hall has an explicit rule against teachers dating parents.” She pauses, and I can hear the strain in her voice. “I’m *so* sorry, Jacob, but I don’t think we should see each other anymore.”

My heart drops with Josephine’s words.

A part of me knew that this was a possibility, but it doesn’t make it any easier to hear. I struggle to find the right words to say, but before I can speak, Josephine continues, “I know it’s not what either of us wants, but I can’t risk losing my job. With how serious this school takes its rules, I just don’t see any way around this,” she says, her voice laced with sadness.

“There’s got to be something we can do,” I plead, unwilling to let her go so easily. She’s become such an important part of my life in such a short amount of time, and the thought of losing her is almost unbearable.

My mind is racing, trying to think of a solution to this problem. But as she explains the potential consequences, it becomes clear that this is not an issue that can be easily resolved.

“The risks are just too high,” she says with a defeated tone. “It’s not just about me losing my job. If it were to get out that we were seeing each other, it could hurt your daughter and her standing at the school. I can’t risk putting Clem in that position,” Josephine explains.

My mind and my heart grow darker and darker as I listen to her words. I know that she's right in everything she says. But reason and feeling are two *very* different things. As much as I understand, and greatly appreciate her concern for Clem, it doesn't make it any easier to accept.

"Thank you," I manage to mutter into the phone. "Thank you for thinking about my daughter and wanting to protect her. I know that you care about her a lot. She feels the same way about you. And you are, evidently, right about everything else as well. I don't want to jeopardize your career in any way. I just ... I just don't want to lose you. You're important to me."

"I know. You're important to me too. This is just a difficult situation."

"I understand," I say, trying to keep my voice as steady as possible.

There's a long pause on the line before Josephine speaks up again.

"I'm so sorry, Jacob. This was not how I wanted things to end between us."

"Me neither," I say, my voice trailing off as I try to come to terms with the fact that this chapter in my life is actually coming to an end. "I'm *so* sorry I put you in this position to begin with. If I had known I—"

"It's not your fault," she interjects. "It's just the circumstances," she continues. "But, I'll always remember our

time together. It was truly one of the best I've ever had," Josephine says in a soft voice.

"Me too," I reply, my mind flashing back to our time together at the cricket match, cheering Clem on together. Our spontaneous dinner and movie date ... dancing together on the rooftop of the theater. Our time exploring Louisa May Alcott's house, kissing in front of the fireplace, laughing over the beef tea...

"I have to go. I have a class in a few minutes," she says, her voice cracking slightly.

"Of course," I say, knowing that this conversation has reached its natural conclusion. "Take care, Jo."

"You too," she says before hanging up.

I collapse back in my chair, feeling hollow and empty. I can't stop thinking about all the things I wanted to say to Josephine, but couldn't find the right words.

Like how I'm falling for her. How I can see a future with her. How I could spend the rest of my life dancing with her on the rooftops and singing with her in the car. How I can envision her a part of Clem's life, a part of *our* life...

And how the thought of never seeing her again makes my heart physically ache. How I don't want to imagine a life without her in it.

But at the same time, I realize that I don't want to be the reason she gets fired from a job that she loves. I don't want to be the one to jeopardize the career she's so proud of, and the



life she's worked so hard to build. Because at the end of the day, regardless of how much I want her to be in my life, love is about sacrifice. It's about putting another person's well-being above your own because their happiness *is* your happiness. And her job makes her happy. Her *life* makes her happy. And I won't be the one to ruin that for her.

And I most definitely don't want to jeopardize Clem in any way.

I take a deep breath, trying to steady myself.

Clementine has been rooting for Josephine and me, but I'm not sure I'll be able to bring myself to tell her what's happened.



“How was school today, darling?” I ask Clem over dinner. I'm doing my best to put on a happy face, but it's proving much more difficult than I anticipated.

“It was good. We learned about the solar system and I got to be the leader for our group project,” Clem responds, her eyes lighting up as she talks about her day.

“Wow, that's awesome! You're such a smart girl,” I say, my heart swelling with pride.

“Thanks, Daddy,” she says, a smile spreading across her face. “Miss Andrews taught us about Don Quixote today.”

My heart sinks at the sound of Josephine's name, but I try to keep a neutral expression on my face. “That sounds

interesting. What did you learn about Don Quixote?" I ask, trying to steer the conversation away from Josephine.

"I learned that he thought he was a knight and went on all these crazy adventures with his friend Sancho Panza," she says, her excitement palpable.

"That does sound pretty crazy," I say, trying to keep the conversation light.

"Yeah, but Miss Andrews says there are lessons to be learned from it. She said that sometimes people have to take risks in order to pursue their dreams," Clem continues, unknowingly hitting a sensitive chord with me. "But she also said that we have to be careful about the risks we take, and make sure that we don't hurt ourselves, or others, in the process."

*Wise words from Josephine*, I think to myself, my heart heavy with longing for her. But I know that I can't let my feelings cloud my judgment. I need to do what's best for both Clem and Josephine, even if it means sacrificing my own happiness.

"That's very true, Clem. And it's important to have people in our lives who care about us enough to look out for us," I say, my eyes meeting hers.

She nods in agreement, her gaze unwavering. "Yeah, like Miss Andrews. She cares about us a lot, doesn't she, Daddy?"

"She definitely does," I say softly, a pang of regret tugging at my heartstrings as I think about what could have been between

us. “And Daddy cares about you even more,” I add, reaching across the table to give Clem’s hand a comforting squeeze.

She smiles at me, a glimmer of mischief in her eyes. “But Daddy, you need someone to care about you too,” she says, her tone teasing. “That’s why you and Miss Andrews are going to get married.”

I can feel my heart stop as Clem’s words sink in.

My mind races, trying to come up with some kind of response that won’t devastate her. She’s just a child, after all, and I don’t want to burden her with the weight of my heartache.

“Oh, sweetie,” I say, trying to keep my voice light. “That’s not quite how it works.”

“Why not?” she asks, her brow furrowing in confusion. “You and Miss Andrews obviously like each other a lot. And you’re both grown-ups. It’s not like you have cooties or anything,” she says, a hint of a giggle in her voice at the last part.

I can’t help but chuckle along with her, but my heart is heavy with a sense of loss.

Clem is right—the connection between Josephine and me is obvious to anyone who’s paying attention. But it’s not that simple. Life isn’t always like the stories we read in books, where love conquers all and the hero and heroine ride off into the sunset together. Real life is messy and complicated, and sometimes sacrifices have to be made for the greater good.

“I know it seems that way. But ... there are things that grown-ups have to consider that kids don’t,” I say, pausing for a moment to collect my thoughts. “Sometimes, things just don’t work out the way we want them to. And that’s okay. We just have to learn to be grateful for the people who are in our lives, for however long they may be there.”

Clem looks up at me with big, searching eyes, and I can see the worry etched across her features. “But Daddy, you’re sad. I don’t want you to be sad,” she says, her voice trembling slightly.

“I know, sweetie,” I say softly, reaching over to brush a strand of hair out of her face. “But sometimes being sad is a part of life. And it’s okay to feel that way. What’s important is that we keep going, even when things get tough.”

She nods, her eyes still searching my face for answers. “But what about Miss Andrews?” she asks, her voice barely above a whisper.

I take a deep breath, steeling myself for what I have to say next. “Miss Andrews is a wonderful person. And I care about her very much. But sometimes, even when two people care about each other a lot, it’s just not meant to be. And we have to learn to accept that, as hard as it may be.”

Her eyes fill with tears, and I feel a lump in my throat at the sight. I hate making her cry, but I know that I have to be honest with her. “But ... what if it *is* meant to be?” she asks, her voice trembling with emotion.

I shake my head. “It’s not. I wish it were, but it’s just not the right time for us. Maybe someday things will be different, but for now we have to focus on what’s important. And what’s important is our family,” I say, my voice firm but gentle.

Clem snuffles, wiping away her tears with the back of her hand. “I know, Daddy. I just wish things were different,” she says, her voice small.

“I know, sweetie. But all we can do is keep moving forward and try to make the best of each day,” I say, offering her a small smile. “Now, how about some dessert? I picked up some ice cream on the way home.”

My daughter’s eyes light up at the mention of dessert, and I feel a small sense of relief at the temporary distraction.

# Chapter Twenty

## Josephine

“Remind me why we’re here again? This line hasn’t moved in forty minutes.” I can tell just by the look on Larisa’s face that she’s getting hungry. Not just hungry, but hangry.

“We came here because Jo has been moping around for the last two weeks. Not to mention, it’s the best Korean restaurant in the city, remember? Those guys from that YouTube channel said so,” Emmy replies.

It’s true. I *have* been moping around. Ever since I opened that stupid rule book two weeks ago, and had to break the news about it to Jacob, I’ve felt heartsick. I’m talking, curl-up-in-bed-and-not-leave-for-days kind of heartsick.

It’s like I finally realized what I’ve been feeling all along, but now it’s too late to do anything about it.

*I didn’t even feel this bad after my breakup with Tom...*

“Oh, right, of course. *Those* guys from *that* YouTube channel. At this point, I’m convinced you’d eat a park bench if

someone on YouTube told you to do it.” Larisa jokes.

“You might be right.” She laughs. “But apparently *everyone* in Boston saw the same video I did. I didn’t realize it would be such a long wait.”

They’re right. We’ve been waiting in line outside this Korean restaurant for what feels like ages, and it appears to be stagnant—a strong sign that when we’re finally seated, the food will be excellent.

But my hands and feet are freezing, and my head is starting to grow dizzy with hunger. Still, my thoughts circle around what happened between Jacob and me. And at this point, I would do *anything* to get rid of this nagging pit at the bottom of my stomach.

“...I can’t take it anymore.” Larisa grabs a granola bar from her purse, rips it open, and begins to chew.

“What are you doing?” Emmy asks.

“Taking control of the situation before I starve.”

“Okay, Larisa. You’re acting like we’ve been lost in the woods for weeks when you literally ate a muffin at Starbucks within the last four hours—”

“*Five* hours,” Larisa declares.

“Josephine Andrews?” the host calls from the front of the line.

“Did he just say your name?” Larisa looks at me in shock.

I'm equally shocked because we never *gave* the host our names. This place makes people wait around in line like they're about to receive the newest iPhone.

"Do I have a Josephine Andrews here?" the host calls out again.

"Over here." I raise my hand. Everyone in line is staring at us now as the host approaches.

"Your table is ready, come with me." He gestures toward the front door. I look at my friends and we exchange confused glances, before following him inside. I can feel the curious glances of the people in line burning into my back.

"What is happening?" Emmy whispers as we follow the host to our table.

"I have no idea," I reply, my heart racing in anticipation.

Inside, the restaurant is *far* more luxurious than I'd imagined. As a result, it's also far emptier, despite the hundred or so people waiting outside to be seated.

"Why are they keeping all these tables empty?" Larisa asks as the host takes us to a table somewhere at the back of the restaurant.

"For all the important people, I think. Or they don't want to crowd the ones that are already inside. Like I said before, this is the best Korean food in Boston," Emmy explains.

"So, why did they let us in? Are we important?" I ask, taking my coat off and trying to settle in my chair. But as my eyes glide aimlessly around the restaurant, I don't have to look for



an answer anymore. I understand why we were allowed in and why we were given a table right at this very spot.

“Jo? Are you alright? Your cheeks look like they’re on fire. Is it too hot in here? Do you need a glass of water?” Larisa asks.

*It’s very hot, but not because of the temperature.*

I cast a small glance toward my right, and I can see him staring directly at me. Jacob is positioned perfectly, right across from my own table. He’s having dinner with a group of men dressed in very expensive dark suits—most likely, a business dinner. Even though Jacob is wearing the exact same thing as the other men, he stands out like a pearl among rocks. His perfect, handsome face has the poise of a marble statue.

My mind is racing, trying to comprehend the fact that Jacob is here, in this very restaurant, just a few feet away from me. I can feel his eyes on me, and the heat of his gaze sends shivers down my spine. But I try my best to keep my composure and act as if this is a regular night out with friends.

“Jo? What’s happening?”

“Okay, guys, I need you to be as cool and elegant as possible about this, got it? And I mean it. Right there, to our right ... is Jacob Carlton.”

Emmy lets out a small gasp but immediately disguises it as a cough. Larisa keeps a straight face, but I can see that her eyes have widened. I know that both of them are dying to turn their heads and look at him, but I refuse to let that happen.

“No way! He’s here? And so close? Hey, maybe that’s why we were able to get in!” Emmy says and she pretends to be looking at her menu now.

“You think, Sherlock?” Larisa replies sarcastically. “I knew there was something fishy about that. But the real mystery is *how* did he know that you’re here, Jo?”

“He didn’t. When we were outside, waiting in line, I saw a limousine pass by. It made me think of him, but I brushed it off. After all, it’s a big city. It went around the corner. I suppose it *was* him, after all. He must have seen us standing outside and left instructions for the host.”

“Wow ... that’s clever, and very kind of him,” Emmy says.

“But, really, how did he even get in? We didn’t talk to him, let alone see him,” Larisa says.

“Maybe he entered through the back entrance? That’s probably where they let their VIP customers in. You know, celebrities and other rich people who just want their privacy.” Emmy shrugs.

I steal a glance at him and our eyes meet. His lips curve up into a warm smile, one that reaches his beautiful eyes. I feel my own lips reflexively turn upwards at the corners as I’m transported back to the night I met him on the street. And then again the first day of school. And every day we’ve spent together since. I reminisce about the way he took the time to learn my favorite movie, my favorite book, my favorite flowers and desserts, even the origin of my name, and then

incorporated those things into one-of-a-kind experiences that I'll never forget.

*Why did I have to fall for a man who's completely off-limits?!*

"Shall we order, then?" Emmy asks. "I made up my mind."

I choose some random dishes off the menu and repeat them to the waiter. He comes back shortly after with our food.

Except that tonight, I don't really care about eating.

"Gosh, the way he's staring at you is just ... I thought *you* were down bad, but wow. He's in over his head!"

"Do you really think so?" I ask.

"Jo, I'm telling you. There's more heat between you two than there is in the kitchen," Larisa says with a smile that comforts me. "Now, let's order some dessert."

The evening drags on and, with it, the intensity of my feelings. I can no longer deny my longing for him. The restaurant's dim, romantic lighting illuminates every curve in his exquisite face, and in my head I create a thousand scenarios in which we are together.

I pretend to listen to my friends' dinner table chit-chat, but all of my focus is on the other side of the restaurant.

When I sense movement at Jacob's table, I wake from my reverie. I can see that most of the businessmen who were accompanying him are now getting up, clearly ready to leave. Three different waiters rush to bring them their coats.

My heart is beating so loud I'm worried he'll hear it.

I feel as if I'm going to choke.

That's when I realize that Jacob's walking and already halfway to our table.

I take a deep breath as I struggle to make my hands stop shaking. I can't even muster the strength to warn my friends.

"Good evening, ladies." Here he is—tall and imposing, a perfect specimen of man, and he's standing at our table.

Emmy and Larisa stop chatting to look up, and they're just as awestruck as I am.

"Please, excuse me," he continues, "it's not my intention to interrupt your conversation or to spoil the wonderful evening that I am sure you are spending together. I merely want to say hello to Josephine. May I?"

Emmy and Larisa are both taken aback by his refined manners.

"Sure, sure, yeah ... you may ... please ..."

Jacob smiles politely and directs his attention to me once more.

"Josephine, I'm so happy to see you here this evening. Have you enjoyed the Korean dishes?"

"Yes, absolutely. And I'm happy to see you too, Jacob. Please, allow me to introduce you to my best friends, Emmy and Larisa."

Jacob gives a small bow.

“Ladies, once more, delighted.”

“As are we...” they say in unison, as if hypnotized.

A slight, awkward pause follows. Larisa gets up from the table and slowly pulls Emmy as well. “I think I need to refresh my makeup after this wonderful meal. Emmy, will you join me?”

She immediately understands that Jacob and I might want a moment alone and, soon enough, both girls disappear along with their purses down the corridor to the ladies’ bathroom.

I look up at Jacob’s face. It’s the first time we’ve spoken in two weeks and I’m shaking with anticipation as I wait for him to say something.

He pauses for a moment, and then speaks in a slow, deliberate, and quiet voice. “Jo, I’ve missed you. How have you been?”

My eyes widen at his confession, and I feel a rush of heat spread through me. I try my best to keep my composure, but my heart is beating so fast that I can hardly breathe.

*I’ve been a mess, because I’m head over heels in love with you, and I can’t stop thinking about you.*

That’s what I *want* to say. But, “I’ve missed you too,” comes out instead, barely above a whisper. There’s a moment of silence as we both just stare at each other, lost in our own thoughts. “I really wish things were different...” I sigh.

*I hate myself for putting my job before love.*

Jacob nods his head in agreement, his eyes searching mine for understanding. “I know ... I wish I could offer you more than just stolen glances and secret conversations,” he says, his voice laced with regret. “But I understood every word you said to me, Jo. Your job, your career—all of that is on the line, and I respect your decision,” he replies as his eyes bore into mine.

I bite my lip, trying to hold back the tears that are threatening to spill over. It’s not fair that we can’t be together, not when every fiber of my being is screaming for him.

“My feelings for you haven’t changed,” I say, my voice barely above a whisper.

*I just wish I could stop letting other people’s rules and expectations of me dictate my life choices.*

Jacob leans in, his hand reaching out to cup my cheek. The touch of his warm skin against mine sends shivers down my spine and I can feel the heat pooling in my stomach.

“I feel the same,” he murmurs. Our eyes lock onto each other, and I can see an ocean of longing and desire.

But only for a moment.

The spell breaks as my friends return from their trip to the restroom, and they take their seats at our table.

“Ladies, it was a pleasure meeting you tonight.” Jacob nods at me with a superb smile, and exits the restaurant.

Then, the waiter arrives with one final piece of news. “Ladies, your bill has been covered in full, by Mr. Jacob Carlton. He wishes you a pleasant evening.”

# Chapter Twenty-One

## Josephine

“You know this just as well as I do. I can’t date him. We’ve had this conversation before—” I explain to Emmy and Larisa.

“But, Jo ... this is *insanity*,” Larisa interjects. “I’m sorry, but I have to say. It’s gotten to a point where you are literally denying this guy, and denying yourself, but it really seems like you’re giving up something truly amazing.”

“I have to agree with her, Jo,” Emmy says. “Can’t you reconsider? I know that your job is on the line but ... perhaps it’s time to reevaluate your priorities.”

Her words strike me like a bolt of lightning. “What are you even talking about?” I ask.

“Well ... I know that we all talked about this before. But, to tell you the truth, watching all this unfold, and seeing the way you two interact, I’ve changed my mind. I mean, I *do* understand the danger of you getting fired. However, it really does seem to me like you like Jacob. *A lot*. As for him, I would

go so far as to say that he *loves* you. So the question is ... what happens now? Is your job still your number one priority?" Emmy asks.

I blink at her—unsure of what to say because honestly, I'm not even sure what to think anymore.

"I also sincerely believe that Jacob loves you," Larisa adds. "You don't go to such efforts for someone who is just a random crush. The man was patient and persistent. Not only that, but he took the time to find out your favorite flowers and candy and then filled your apartment with them. He sent you a *first edition copy* of your favorite novel. And don't even get me started on the personalized dates he planned for you. That's not the kind of stuff you do for someone you just want to date for a little while."

"His daughter told him all that," I say, trying to brush it off.

"So? He paid attention, remembered it, and used it. And, more importantly, he wanted to make you happy. He could have easily sent you a Prada bag or a pair of diamond earrings that his assistant bought off some website. But he didn't. He took the time to learn what you like and what truly makes you happy," Larisa explains.

My head is light and dizzy and a million thoughts race through my mind. "I ... don't know what to say."

"I think you need to figure out how you feel about Jacob," Emmy adds, in the same warm, kind manner. "Because if you share his feelings and truly love him then you can't let



anything come between you anymore. Not even your position at the school.”

“But *love* doesn’t pay the bills. And the school rules are clear —”

“Jo, he’s a *billionaire*. I’m sure he wouldn’t hesitate to help you,” Larisa interjects.

“I know he would help me, but I’m not interested in his money—I’ve always prided myself on being independent. At that point, I’d be no better than *Tom*.”

Emmy and Larisa exchange a look before Emmy speaks up. “Jo, no one is expecting you to depend on Jacob or his money. We’re simply encouraging you to follow your heart.”

I bite my lip, feeling the weight of their words.

Then Jacob’s voice comes to my mind as I recall the phone call during which I shot him down. It makes my stomach churn to know I turned away a man who cares so deeply for me. A man who has shown me more love than anyone else ever has...

All because of a stupid rule.

*I just wish there was some way I could be with him and keep my job.*

Suddenly, I have an idea.



“Hey friend!” Stephanie greets me. She’s sitting alone in the teacher’s lounge, scrolling on her phone.

The cold November morning light pours through the large windows as I take a seat next to her at one of the little round tables and can’t suppress a yawn. “Good morning, Stephanie.”

“Late night last night?” she asks.

“Umm ... I guess I did stay up a little later than I usually do,” I confess.

“Really? On a school night?” She jokes as if I’m a student here and not a teacher.

“Why not? We’re all entitled to a little fun, aren’t we?”

“Do tell, then. What kind of fun was this? Did you stay up half the night grading essays or did you ... do something else?” she asks poignantly.

“Come on, now, Miss Harris!” I reply although I’m joking myself.

“Jo, you look like you’re glowing. Honestly! And, in my humble experience there is only one thing that could be responsible for that.”

“Pizza?”

“Love.” She laughs. “Who’s this mystery man? Of course, only if you want to tell me, and if you’re comfortable. No pressure here,” she adds, and I know that she means it.

Her warm and comforting smile, as she sips a little more of her coffee, assures me that I’m safe with her.

Still, I cannot bring myself to discuss my feelings for Jacob even with someone as trustworthy as Stephanie. Let alone inside the school. The walls themselves could have ears and Ms. Abadie—an everlasting presence in the hallways—could be very well lurking outside the door right now, listening in. I choose to play it safe and keep it casual.

“Well, you are right,” I begin. “I do have my heart set on an incredible man ... but ... it’s not really important who he is,” I add quickly before Stephanie has a chance to ask me any more questions about his identity.

“That’s fine.” She smiles again. “All that matters is that you’re so happy with him. And, honestly, now that I’ve gotten to know you in these past months, I can safely say that he must be a stand-up guy.”

“Stephanie, that’s so nice of you to say ... I’m so glad that I have you on my side. You know, sometimes I feel as if...”

“You mean with Ms. Abadie?” she asks, already knowing what I’m about to say.

“Yes. Honestly, before I came to work here, I was *so* excited. I mean, it’s such an extraordinary opportunity for me, career-wise.”

“Absolutely. Jameson is a wonderful institution not just for the students, but for us as well.” Stephanie nods.

“Sure. But since I started, and I suppose because of the treatment I received from Ms. Abadie, I just...”

“What? Have you changed your opinion?” she asks me.

“Not necessarily. I mean, not about the school itself. I still hold Jameson Juniper Hall in the highest of regards. I guess I just ... I was expecting something else. Perhaps not all these office politics and teachers who are ready to blast everything and everyone in their way to get a promotion. It’s baffling to me,” I confess.

Stephanie contemplates my words for a few moments, and I realize that I might be even bolder and tell her about another thought I had. Just to see what her opinion is.

“I guess you’re right,” Stephanie replies. “The school is supposed to be just about the students but I guess that Ms. Abadie has, sadly, lost sight of that. Still, if you want my advice, don’t let it get you down. You’re a wonderful teacher, Jo, and the children love you. That should be all that matters! Well, that and this newfound love in your life that has got you looking like you just spent a week at Disneyland!”

“Actually, about that ... can I ask your opinion on something, Stephanie?”

“Absolutely. What is it?”

“How difficult is it to get a transfer to another school?”

She looks at me in silence for a moment, as if she’s trying to read my mind.

“You mean to another private school?”

“Yes, I suppose so,” I reply.

“Well, it all depends on which school you have in mind, and what their requirements are. But Jo, be honest with me. Are

you doing this because of Ms. Abadie? Or are you motivated by something else?”

In my mind’s eye, I can see Jacob’s gorgeous face floating before me—but I could never speak a word of this to Stephanie.

“I was just thinking that, perhaps, I could start over at a different private school where there won’t be anyone trying to make life difficult for me. What do you think?”

“Sure, your idea is great. However, there are just a few things that you might need to consider,” Stephanie says. “For example, any new school that you might want to go to, especially a private one, will want to know why you left Jameson after only one semester. You can imagine they will have questions or will think that something bad happened.”

“But it didn’t!” I protest.

“I know that. They don’t. Even so, they might assume that you weren’t able to face the challenges or the pressure of a private school. And then there’s the fact that all these private schools are really just one, big, private community. All the kids know each other, all the families are linked, they’re friends, business partners, and so on. Everyone knows everyone else. Which could be either good or bad for you. It could play to your advantage, or you might be rejected someplace else.”

“I didn’t really consider any of this...” I say as I look out the window into the deserted courtyard.

“And there’s one more thing,” Stephanie replies.

“What’s that?”

“Ms. Abadie is in charge of transfers. Honestly, I don’t think she’ll make things easy for you when you try to secure a good position at another private school.”

*Well there goes that idea...*

# Chapter Twenty-Two

## Jacob

For the past several weeks, Clem's nanny has been dropping her off and picking her up from school. After Josephine broke the news to me that she didn't think we should see each other anymore, I figured it would be best if I gave her a little space. Mostly because I don't want to create an awkward situation. But also because I don't want to make Josephine uncomfortable.

This is her choice and I have to respect it.

But today's the first day of December, and the school is organizing a talent show in honor of the holiday month. Clem is Anne Boleyn in a somewhat historical skit based on Henry the VIII's life and reign in England.

As the limousine slowly pulls in and comes to a stop outside Jameson Juniper Hall, I realize that, above all, I miss Josephine. Talking to her, laughing, joking, her mere presence.

Seeing her at the restaurant the other night was a welcomed relief. When I drove past and spotted her waiting in line with her friends, it felt like once again, fate was working in our favor. I couldn't stand the thought of her waiting out there for hours in the freezing cold weather, so I asked the host if he could add them to our party.

At a different table, of course.

But from our brief interactions, I could tell that she still had feelings for me ... and I still have strong feelings for her as well. I've been thinking about her constantly since our encounter at the restaurant, all I want to do is be near her.

I can only hope that somehow, some way, fate will bring us together again.

Clem tugs at my arm, snapping me out of my thoughts. "Dad, hurry up! I don't want to be late for the show!"

I smile down at her and ruffle her hair. "Don't worry, pumpkin. We're not going to be late."

I step out of the limousine and am greeted by the crisp winter air. As we make our way into the building, I see Josephine standing in the hallway, surrounded by a group of students. Her eyes meet mine for a moment before she looks away, and my heart skips a beat. Part of me wants to go over and talk to her, but I don't want to interrupt her conversation with the students, or make her feel awkward in any way.

Clem, however, has no such reservations and rushes over to Josephine, practically pulling me along with her.



“Hi, Miss Andrews!” Clem greets her, beaming up at her with a smile that could light up a room.

“Hello, Clem! Are you excited for the talent show today?” Josephine asks her, crouching down to her level.

“Oh, yes! Will you be watching?” Clem asks eagerly.

“I wouldn’t miss it for the world,” Josephine replies, glancing up at me with a small smile. I can’t help but grin in response.

Josephine looks just as radiant as ever, dressed in a dark green velvet dress that looks stunning against her sunny, blonde hair. I feel as if I haven’t seen her in two years. It’s funny what longing will do to your heart. Simply and elegantly, she tucks a strand of hair behind her ear. I find that one gesture more endearing, and beautiful, than anything I’ve ever seen.

“Thank you, Miss Andrews, you’re the best,” Clem says, while practically jumping into Josephine’s arms. The bond these two share is so strong, it warms my heart while simultaneously crushing it into a million pieces because I want so badly for Josephine to be more than just Clem’s teacher.

“I’m going to go backstage now, okay, Daddy?” Clem says, not waiting for my reply before darting off towards the auditorium.

“Okay, darling, break a leg,” I call out before realizing Josephine and I are now alone in the hallway. I take a step closer to her, unable to resist the pull that she has on me.

“Hi,” I say softly, hoping that my voice doesn’t betray the nervousness that I feel.

“Hi,” Josephine replies, her eyes meeting mine once again. There’s a moment of silence between us as we both take each other in.

“Come here often?” I ask.

She laughs and arranges the folds of her dress. “Oh, no ... this is my first time.” She jokes. “How about you?”

“My first time as well. My daughter is the lead in one of the skits.”

“The lead? You don’t say.”

“Yes, yes. She plays Anne Boleyn.”

“I know. She asked me about a million questions in the past two weeks including: what Anne Boleyn ate, what kind of skin care she used, what music she listened to, and who was her favorite K-Pop star,” Josephine explains.

“Wow ... all very relevant information.” I chuckle.

“And historically accurate.” She laughs. “And you? How was it living with the star of the show these past two weeks? I’m guessing there must have been a lot of rehearsals?”

I pass a hand across my face as Josephine watches me and starts to laugh.

“That bad, huh? Well ... at least she’s dedicated.”

“You have *no* idea,” I say. “She scared the ladies who clean the house half to death. She started bossing around the butler

and yelling nonsense at him until I actually had to put her in time out! And then she pouted and yelled at me because she's a queen and I had no right to do that.”

“Wow ... I see those pre-teen hormones are kicking in. What about the lines? Did you help her rehearse?”

“Yes, and she didn't hesitate to boss *me* around, as well. I played Henry, of course. And by played, I mean that I sat there while she got up on every piece of furniture and pretended to have her head cut off.”

“Sounds like a fun couple of weeks,” Josephine says with a laugh.

I chuckle along with her, noticing how easily we fall into comfortable conversation. The chemistry between us is palpable, and I have to fight the urge to lean in and kiss her.

Josephine notices my glances, and her cheeks flush a bright red.

“I think we should make our way to the auditorium,” she says.

“Right. The show must go on!” I reply quickly before leading the way down the hallway.

As we walk together, I can't help but marvel at how surreal this moment feels. I had no expectations for what might happen tonight—but just getting to talk to Josephine was more than I could have hoped for.

I'm amazed at how we're both able to pick up right where we left off. In spite of the devastating three weeks apart, it

feels as though nothing has changed between us.

So, I'm going to continue to follow her lead and enjoy this moment for what it is. We're both here to support Clem and her classmates.

As we reach the auditorium doors, Josephine stops to grab a program. She's so beautiful in this light, illuminated by the fading rays of sunlight that are streaming through the windows as if they were painting a portrait of us together.

There are so many things I want to say to her right now—so many words that have been left unspoken. But instead, we just stand for a few moments staring into each other's eyes until a voice comes over the loudspeaker.

“Ladies and gentlemen, welcome to Jameson Juniper Hall's Annual Talent Show!” the announcer booms. “Please find your seats and get ready to enjoy the show!”

Josephine and I exchange a look before making our way into the auditorium. The room is filled with parents and students alike, all buzzing with excitement.

“Hi Miss Andrews!” Josephine is quickly intercepted by a group of students who greet her with enthusiasm.

She turns to me, smiling, and says, “I'll catch up with you later.”

I nod, watching as she makes her way towards the students. Part of me is disappointed that we're not sitting together, but the other part of me knows that's wishful thinking. I'm just grateful for the little time we *did* get to spend together tonight.

I scour the auditorium for a good seat, and spot one toward the front. I make my way over and settle in, eagerly anticipating Clem's performance.

But just as the lights are about to dim and the show is about to begin, I feel a tap on my shoulder. I turn, and to my utter surprise, Josephine is standing there, a small smile playing on her lips. "Do you mind if I sit here?" she asks, already settling into the empty seat beside me before I have the chance to reply.

"Of course not," I reply, inwardly rejoicing at the thought of sitting next to her.

We sit in silence for a moment, watching the stage in anticipation.

As if on cue, Ms. Abadie appears to the right of the stage, fluttering the red velvet curtains and creating a big spectacle. In an instant, she starts scolding one of the children.

"Does she do anything other than bully everyone?" I ask Josephine, flabbergasted.

"Not to my knowledge."

"Is she still giving you a hard time?" I ask, noticing that Josephine's face is now a little worried at the mention of Ms. Abadie.

"Mmm ... not *exactly*. Though, she makes it pretty obvious that she doesn't like me. But, then again, she doesn't like anyone. I've been trying really hard not to take it personally. Because she doesn't even know me. What reason could she

possibly have for disliking me? I just try my best to stay out of her way.”

“That’s probably for the best. But as I said before at the Open House, I have no problem submitting a complaint to the Headmaster, just say the word.”

She nods in appreciation.

We watch the lights flicker three times, silently announcing the beginning of the talent show. They grow dim and golden, at which point, Miss Jensen from the Art Department—a small brunette woman dressed in a purple gown—makes an appearance on stage.

Just as she’s about to start speaking and welcoming everyone, Ms. Abadie swoops in and takes the microphone away from her. There’s a collective gasp from the audience as well as a few smirks here and there.

“Here we go…” Josephine utters under her breath, shaking her head. “She can’t even let Miss Jensen introduce the children.”

“The fact she thinks this behavior is going to land her a promotion is mind-blowing to me,” I whisper.

The awkward moment passes and the students are finally introduced to the stage one by one, dressed in various outfits and costumes, performing a wide variety of talent acts.

While waiting for Clem’s performance, I have time to focus on the fact that Josephine is sitting so closely to me. Thoughts are racing through my head. So far, everything between us has

felt very normal. In fact, I'm surprised to see that there's no awkwardness at all. She simply took a seat next to me and it's as if nothing has changed between us. We started talking and laughing as usual—no embarrassing moments, no weird pauses in the conversation.

Josephine is, once again, cheering alongside me for my daughter. Just like she's done time and time again—like at school pickup, when Clem passed her science exam and at the cricket match when Clem scored.

And I must admit, it feels good to have Josephine's support in moments like these, even if it's not in the capacity I hoped it would be.

I glance toward the stage where a group of girls are now playing the flute. The audience is listening to them in awe, even though some of the grandparents present seem to be closing their eyes far too often—and for far longer than they should.

Our hands are now touching on the armrest between our seats. It's an electrifying feeling.

“Oh, what in the name of all that is good and pure is this?” Josephine asks.

We watch as an entire group of teenage boys takes the stage dressed in street clothes—or what very rich children think are street clothes, meaning expensive hoodies and clean sneakers that have been taken out of the box three minutes ago.

“No, no, please don't tell me that they're going to...”

Rap. As soon as the music starts, the boys break into a rap song with lyrics clearly written by themselves. We watch in horror as they rhyme—terribly—about days “in the hood” and how tough life is, even though they arrived at school this morning in limousines that cost half a million dollars each. To our dismay, the teenage girls in the audience are absolutely loving it and slowly start to cheer and even whistle. Ms. Abadie swoops in like a vulture to silence them but the girls just laugh at her.

“They’re going to regret that on Monday.” Josephine shakes her head.

Finally, the abysmal rap number is over and the boys leave the stage covered in teenage glory and success.

“Wow ... to be fifteen again and be able to impress girls just by wearing a hoodie,” I say with a smirk.

She laughs and we’re now so close that our arms, legs, and torsos are glued together—one entity, one mind, and one heart. Perfection and happiness all in one.

“There’s Clem. Her skit is next!”

A fake, cardboard castle is rolled onto the stage to serve as the backdrop for the medieval skit. A boy who looks frightened to death, probably by Clem, walks into the spotlight dressed like King Henry, followed by Clem herself and a number of extras. She looks radiant and confident, like the queen she’s supposed to represent.



As soon as she spots Josephine and me, Clem waves, much to everyone's delight and amusement.

"Welcome, everyone, to my kingdom," Clem begins, her voice shaking only slightly. "I am Anne Boleyn, and this is the story of my life, or at least, the parts that are appropriate for a school play."

The crowd erupts into laughter and the skit is a huge success—partly because Clem has natural charisma, partly because the boy playing Henry seems frightened that any moment now the makeshift castle will collapse, and partly because it's so badly written, it's hilarious.

During the climax, when Clem pretends to have her head chopped off as Anne Boleyn, she climbs a set of fake stairs and proudly declares:

"One small step for mankind, one huge step for England!"

As her stage partner watches, she pokes out her tongue and pretends to pass on the fake stairs in the most dramatic way known to mankind.

The audience erupts in a cheer and both Josephine and I give her a standing ovation.

She waves at us again as she takes a bow and disappears into the wings.

"Wow. That was ... dramatic." I chuckle.

"That's theater for you."

"No, that's Clem for you," I reply, as we both laugh.

# Chapter Twenty-Three

## Josephine

Tonight, with Jacob, is more than I could have hoped for. It almost feels like we're a couple, sitting and cheering on our beloved daughter at her school play.

*Except ... we're not.*

And it's my fault. Well, it's technically the school's fault, but *I'm* the one who refuses to break the school rules for *love*.

Seeing Jacob at that restaurant sparked a fire in me that I haven't been able to put out. Which is why I've been spending every waking minute trying to come up with a solution to this problem.

My friends seem to think I should either sneak around or simply quit and "take a chance on love."

What they don't seem to understand is that I have bills to pay. I drained every last penny of my savings picking up the pieces after my breakup with Tom. And I refuse to start my life completely over, *again*.

I mean sure, if I quit, I might finally have time to finish the book I've been writing in secret. Except, there's a reason the manuscript has been collecting dust in my desk drawer for two years ... it's not that *easy* to write a book. And I most certainly wouldn't have it finished and published in time to make next month's rent.

And let's say I did sneak around with Jacob and then got caught—I'll surely be fired on the spot. Which would further prove to my parents that I'm an utter *failure*.

But sitting here with Jacob, my mind is filled with possibilities—with what-ifs and maybes. Maybe we could find a way to make this work.

I honestly thought my idea to transfer schools was the perfect solution ... until Stephanie informed me that Ms. Abadie is the one who handles the transfers—and considering Ms. Abadie seems to loathe my very existence, I don't think she'll make it easy on me.

I steal a glance at Jacob and catch him looking at me, his hazel eyes sparkling with amusement. I can feel a blush creeping up my neck and I quickly turn my attention back towards the stage.

There's a boy wearing a kilt playing bagpipes, and for a brief moment, the entire auditorium is filled with the sound of Scotland. It's a beautiful and haunting melody that transports us all to another time and place.

As the bagpipes fade into the background, I feel Jacob's hand move closer to mine on the armrest. The electricity

between us intensifies, and in the safety of the dark auditorium, the temptation to grab it overcomes me.

I intertwine my fingers with his and squeeze lightly. He looks at me, his eyes full of surprise and delight. He responds with a gentle squeeze of his own and I feel my heart swell with joy.

The talent show continues, but all I can focus on is the warmth of Jacob's hand in mine. His touch is like a balm to my soul. I never want to let go.

But as the auditorium lights come back on, the reality of our situation comes crashing down on me, as we're forced to release our hands.

"Ladies and gentlemen, please enjoy the fifteen-minute intermission," a voice on the loudspeaker announces.

"Shall we go find Clem?" Jacob asks as we stand up and join the rest of the parents filing out of the auditorium.

"Oh, Ms. Abadie requires all the children to stay in the back until after the show," I explain.

"Of course she does," he says with a chuckle.

It's a sound that makes me want to throw caution to the wind and take advantage of the intermission to steal a few more moments with him.

"But we can go grab a coffee or something, if you'd like?" I suggest, surprising myself with my own boldness.

Jacob looks at me with a smirk, “I thought you said breaking school rules wasn’t an option.”

I bite my lip, feeling a mix of excitement and apprehension stir within me. “A quick coffee break couldn’t hurt.” I shrug, my cheeks heating up under his gaze.

Jacob’s face lights up. “I’d love that.”

“Actually, come to think of it, you *have* to try the hot chocolate here.” I grin.

“Wait, are you asking me to accompany you to hot cocoa?” Jacob wiggles his eyebrows.

“This really has come full circle, hasn’t it.” I laugh.

“Lead the way, Miss Andrews,” Jacob says, gesturing to me to go first as we make our way out of the auditorium.

We make our way to the hot chocolate vending machine near the teacher’s lounge on the other side of the building, chatting idly about Clem’s performance and the school’s talent show. The air between us is thick with unspoken desire, but we both know that we can’t act on it.

Not here, at least.

As we reach the vending machine, we both simultaneously go for the same cup. Our hands brush against each other and the familiar electric shock from earlier returns. We’re standing so closely, I can feel the heat radiating from his body. It’s taking all my willpower not to kiss him right here in the school hallway.

I take the cup he offers me and watch as the machine pours the hot cocoa into it. The rich, chocolaty aroma fills the air and my mouth waters in anticipation. But as soon as my cup is full I turn around and hand it to him. “Here, try this.”

He gently grabs the steaming cup of hot cocoa, his gaze intense on mine before he takes a sip. I watch in silence, the tension between us building. His eyes never leave mine as his lips linger on the edge of the cup. I feel something stir within me, something raw and primal.

I need him like I need air in my lungs, and it’s becoming increasingly difficult to resist him. But I have to, for Clem’s sake, for my job’s sake. At least until I can figure out a solution...

Jacob savors the sip, nodding in approval. “Wow, this is ... this is unreal. It’s *really* good.”

“I told you,” I reply, with a smile. “Apparently it’s made with chocolate from Switzerland...”

“I’m glad to know my tuition dollars are going towards something worthwhile,” he jokes.

He makes a cup and we find a small table in the teacher’s lounge to sit down and enjoy our hot cocoa. The silence between us is both comfortable and unbearable, the tension palpable. I clear my throat and break the silence. “So, how have you been?” I ask, hoping to ease the tension.

“Do you want my honest answer or the polite one?” Jacob smirks, raising an eyebrow.

I chuckle softly. “Honesty is always appreciated.”

Jacob leans back in his chair, his expression turning serious. “Honestly, I’ve been struggling a bit, lately. I’ve had a hard time focusing at work, and I just haven’t felt like myself.”

I can tell he’s holding back. And I know it’s because he’s trying to protect my feelings. But I feel the same way, and every ounce of my being wants to tell him that. But I also feel like it’s not fair. Because *I’m* the one that put us in this situation ... and I *don’t* have a solution.

I take a deep breath, trying to control my emotions. And that’s when I decide it’s best to just be honest with him. “I’m struggling too,” I confess softly, meeting his gaze. “Because if I’m honest, I haven’t been able to stop thinking about you since the day I bumped into you on the sidewalk, and ... I feel like walking away from you was the biggest mistake of my life.”

Jacob’s eyes widen in surprise at my words. It’s as if he’s finally hearing what he’s been hoping for, but never dared to assume. “Jo...” he starts, his voice low and hoarse with emotion. “I lo—”

“Miss Andrews!” Jacob and I both startle at the sound before turning to see Ms. Abadie standing in the doorway, her eyes narrowing as she takes in our proximity to one another. She gives us both a disapproving glare before turning to me. “What are you two doing in here?” she snaps.

But before I can say anything, Jacob speaks. “Ms. Abadie, it’s great to see you. I had heard that Jameson Juniper Hall has

amazing hot cocoa from Switzerland, and Miss Andrews here was kind enough to show me where it was.” Jacob says, his voice calm and collected.

My heart races as I watch Jacob expertly diffuse the situation but I can’t help but fume at Ms. Abadie’s intrusion at the most inopportune time.

She snuffles, eyeing us suspiciously. “I see. Well, the intermission is about to end. I suggest you both head back to the auditorium. This area is for faculty only.”

Jacob stands up, nodding politely at Ms. Abadie. “Of course.”

I mouth the words *thank you* to Jacob before following him out of the teacher’s lounge, my heart is heavy with disappointment over the words that were left unsaid.

I can feel Ms. Abadie’s eyes drilling holes into my back, as she follows closely behind.

Jacob whispers to me, “If that woman gives you any more grief, just send her to me.” I smile at him in relief and gratitude and nod my head in the affirmative.

As Jacob and I are about to make our way back inside the auditorium, Ms. Abadie clears her throat and calls out my name, “Miss Andrews!”

I freeze in my tracks, reluctantly turning to face her.

“I must insist that you come with me backstage for the remainder of the evening,” she states firmly. Jacob looks at me



with concern in his eyes, but I shake my head slightly, silently telling him not to worry.

“Of course, Ms. Abadie,” I say, my voice steady. “Is there something wrong?”

“I need a chaperone for the rest of the talent show,” she explains curtly. “All hands on deck.”

I nod, knowing better than to argue with her.

Jacob disappears inside the auditorium and I follow Ms. Abadie. As we make our way backstage, she corners me. “Listen, Miss Andrews. I don’t pay you to fraternize with the parents. This is a school event, and you are to remain professional at all times,” she hisses.

“I understand, Ms. Abadie,” I reply, feeling my blood boil at her condescending tone. “But surely you can see that we were just enjoying a cup of hot cocoa during the intermission. It’s not like we were making out in the hallway or something.”

“Regardless, I don’t want to see you getting too friendly with any of the parents, *especially* not Mr. Carlton.” She sneers as she says his name, like it’s a dirty word.

I bite back my retort, knowing that arguing with her won’t do me any favors. Instead, I nod my head placidly. “I understand, Ms. Abadie,” I repeat obediently.

As the talent show resumes, I find myself struggling to focus. All I can think about is Jacob—the way he looked at me earlier, the unfinished sentence he left hanging between us. I can’t help but wonder what he was about to say.

Was he going to tell me he loved me?

Or was it something else entirely?

# Chapter Twenty-Four

## Josephine

I'm standing in front of my literature class, but my mind is still reeling from my encounter with Jacob last night. I can't shake off the feeling that we left something unsaid, and it's driving me crazy. Ms. Abadie was tight on my heels all evening, so I didn't even get a chance to say goodbye.

I clear my throat and try to regain my focus.

"I need you to read these chapters and write a five-hundred-word essay for next class. Please include your opinions on the themes and ideas that you find most relevant. Also, please do not copy anything off the internet because you know I can tell!"

They look at me with stony faces and sometimes I wonder what must truly be going on through their heads as I say these words. I try to remember what it felt like when I was ten and stuck in class all day but I need to push those thoughts away for now because there simply isn't time.

“Alright. Now, let’s move on to the next part of the class. Does everyone have their copy of *The Hobbit*?”

They mumble something as a group.

“Please answer clearly, I can’t hear you.”

“Yes, Miss Andrews!” twenty voices echo in the old classroom. The stone walls reflect their little voices back at them as if we’re in a church of some kind.

“Good. Let’s begin with a word about the author. J.R.R. Tolkien, which stands for John Ronald Reuel Tolkien, was born ... Andrew, please take your fingers out of your nose while I speak. Thank you. Actually, take your fingers out of your nose when I’m not speaking, as well. I think we can all agree that’s good advice for everyone here. If you don’t remember anything else from my class today, at least remember that, and I’ll be happy.”

The other children giggle quietly as Andrew wipes his fingers on the lapels of his extremely expensive school uniform. Coming from a vastly wealthy family does not mean children stop digging for gold in their noses, I see.

Kids will be kids, no matter what.

“So, back to Tolkien. You are, I’m sure, familiar with him, thanks to his enormously famous series of books titled *The Lord of the Rings*. Perhaps some of you have already read it, perhaps even more of you have seen the movies.”

I pause for some kind of answer, but none comes. They look at me like I’m talking about seeing spaceships over

Manhattan. With a pang in my heart, I realize that these children are ten and that they grew up with Marvel movies, not fantasy ones. *The Lord of the Rings* is my childhood, not theirs. A little shaken, as I was certain that my lecture for today was going to be a success, I try to keep going.

“Um ... so, the movies are based on a series of books written by Tolkien, as is *The Hobbit*. I thought you might have seen them, but I guess ... it's just me. Alrighty then. The book we'll be discussing in class has been a classic of children's literature for almost a century now. It was first published at the end of the thirties and saw massive success after...”

“Miss?”

“Yes?”

“What's a hobbit?”

I sincerely did not see this question coming, but at least the children are engaging with me about the book.

“Oh, I think you're going to like this. A hobbit is a small...”

The door of the classroom bangs open, making all the children jump. Ms. Abadie walks in, holding a clipboard complete with a small pencil tied to it by a chain.

“Miss Andrews, students.” Ms. Abadie nods, her voice ice cold. “I'm here for an inspection.”

Nervously, I glance around the classroom. Even the squirmiest, most active kids are stick-straight in their chairs. It's almost as if they're hoping that if they don't move, Ms. Abadie won't notice them.

“Ms. Abadie,” I say, trying to keep a light, friendly tone. “I think we should try to avoid scaring the children.”

“The children are fine. Are you ready for the inspection?”

Before I can answer her question, she steps inside the room and shuts the door behind her.

“I’m not sure I understand what you’re talking about. I wasn’t notified about any such thing. The Headmaster...”

“Notice is not required for inspections, and I don’t see the point in giving advance notice anyway. I want to sit in on your class and watch your method. You’ve been here four months, and you’re overdue for your first evaluation.”

“Alright. But I do wish you would have allowed me to prepare a little first.”

“No need. Proceed,” she barks. The children, still silent and unmoving, watch her with enormous eyes.

Tucked in her own desk, Clem has a smirky look on her face. I can only hope she doesn’t do or say anything out of line while Ms. Abadie is present.

“Children, let’s go back to our lesson. So, as I was saying, J.R.R. Tolkien was born in South Africa but he lived most of his life in England. He was a professor of Anglo-Saxon language at the University of Oxford. Raise your hand—who here has heard of Oxford?”

As expected, most of the children put their hands up, including Clem. No doubt, many of their parents, aunts and uncles, and certainly grandparents must have been educated at

the great universities of Europe, Oxford included. Naturally, most of the children will finish their higher education in those places as well.

I can feel Ms. Abadie's gaze burning into me as I continue with my lecture. I try to focus on the children, on the way their eyes light up when I mention the dragons and the wizards and the adventures waiting for them in the pages of *The Hobbit*.

"Miss Andrews," Ms. Abadie interjects from the back of the classroom.

"Yes?"

"I'm sorry, but I've noticed that your class seems a bit *lacking* in engagement. Perhaps if you were to spice up your lesson plan a little, the children would be more interested in what you have to say."

I bristle at the criticism, but hold my tongue. "I'll take that into consideration, Ms. Abadie. Now, if you'll excuse us, we have a lesson to finish."

She nods, but continues to stand at the back of the room, arms crossed, watching me like a hawk.

I take a deep breath and try to regain my composure. "Now, where were we? Oh yes, so Tolkien—"

"Miss Andrews, how about you skip the lesson on Tolkien all together and teach them about something more engaging? Something useful, perhaps. Something that will keep their attention and spark their creativity?" Ms. Abadie says, her tone condescending.

I grit my teeth, trying to remain calm. “I’ve been teaching literature for nearly a decade now, Ms. Abadie. I know how to engage my students.”

“Well, it doesn’t seem like it, does it?”

I feel my face flush with anger at her words. There’s something about her demeanor and the way she’s scolding me right now that’s reminiscent of my mother. I take a deep breath and try to keep my cool. “Perhaps if you let me finish my lesson, you’d see that my students are fully engaged and attentive.”

When she doesn’t speak, I feel emboldened to continue, “I’m one of the most specialized people in this field, Ms. Abadie. Do you have a point with all this, or are you here just to interrupt this class and give the children something to laugh about with their parents over dinner?” I don’t know what’s happening right now, let alone how these words are even leaving my mouth. I can hear myself speaking, but I have no control. It’s like an out-of-body experience. I know perfectly well it’s a mistake to contradict Ms. Abadie—she’s the one person at this school I shouldn’t cross.

And I just did it in front of an entire classroom of students.

Ms. Abadie stares daggers at me. Instead of replying, she writes furiously on her clipboard and then gets up to leave. We all watch her as she heads out the door and slams it behind her.

“I am sorry about that, children. Honestly, I don’t even think I should have allowed her in here in the first place. I take full responsibility for that...”



“It’s not your fault, Miss Andrews ... she’s just like that,” one of the children replies.

“Yes. All the older students say that she’s a grumpy old bat,” another student chimes in.

I try to smile but, somehow, I still feel defeated. I look at Clem who appears to be more serious than usual.

I don’t think the Wicked Witch of the West has spoken her last line yet.



The day is finally over. As usual, Ms. Abadie and her schemes broke through, trying to rain on my parade. All my students have vacated the classroom and, as I watch them disperse through the hallway, I head toward my own office.

It’s peaceful and quiet in here. The smell of old books and scorched leather envelops me like an old friend. But I can’t shake the awful feeling that Ms. Abadie is trying to find a reason to fire me.

A soft knock on my door breaks my thoughts. I look up to see Clementine peeking in at me through the small window and motion for her to come in.

“Miss Andrews, are you okay?” she asks with a worried tone that cuts straight to my heart.

“I’m fine.” I lie. “Just a little shaken up after that interaction with Ms. Abadie.”

She walks into my office and closes the door behind her. “Well, you shouldn’t let her get to you,” she says, wrapping her arms around me. “You’re an amazing teacher and all of us know it.”

I lean into her embrace, overwhelmed with gratitude for her existence. “Thank you, Clem,” I whisper. “That really means a lot to me.”

“Of course,” she says with a reassuring smile as she pats me on the back. “And, if it’s worth anything, I thought your Tolkien lesson was really interesting.”

I let out a laugh of relief. “I’m glad someone appreciated it.”

She nods before reaching into her pocket and pulling out a colorful beaded bracelet. “Here, I made this for you. It’s a friendship bracelet,” she says with a smile, handing it to me.

*Be still my heart.*

I take the bracelet and admire the intricate design of the purple and pink beads, as well as the white butterflies that seem to flutter around it.

“You made this? It’s beautiful,” I say, feeling touched by her gesture. “Thank you so much!”

She smiles and nods. “I know it’s not much, but I wanted to show you that I appreciate everything you do for us. And for me.”

I feel a lump form in my throat.

*This is why I became a teacher, to make a difference and be there for my students.*

“You have no idea how much this means to me, Clem. Thank you.”

She nods before grabbing her bag and heading for the door. “I should get going. My dad’s waiting for me outside.”

“Of course. Have a good evening.”

As she walks out, I feel a sense of warmth wash over me. Clem is *so* special, and I consider myself lucky to be in her life.

I only wish I could be more than just her literature instructor...

Although ... after my encounter today with Ms. Abadie, I’m not so sure I’ll even *be* a literature instructor much longer.

My heart sinks at the thought of Ms. Abadie scheming against me.

*If that woman gives you any more grief, just send her to me.*

Jacob’s words from last night echo in my mind.

And suddenly, I realize what I need to do.

# Chapter Twenty-Five

## Jacob

**Jo:** *Can I call you?*

Without hesitation, I touch the screen of my phone and call her. “I’m glad you asked, but you know that you don’t have to. You can call me whenever you want, no matter what,” I say instead of “*hello.*”

“Thank you,” she replies sweetly.

“Are you okay, Jo? Clem told me what happened at school today.”

“Not really...” she says. “Jacob, I—I really need to talk to you. Is there any chance we can meet somewhere ... discreetly?”

My heart leaps into my throat as I hear the desperation in her voice. “Of course. Whatever you need, I’m here for you. I’ve got a place in mind. I’ll text the directions.”

“Okay great. I’ll see you there in an hour?”

“Absolutely,” I reply before ending the call.



Even though the Blue Bird is a private restaurant, it’s more crowded than I hoped it would be tonight. The waiter shows me to a small, cozy nook at the back of the restaurant, which—he assures me—is prepared especially for my meeting with Josephine, as per my instructions.

I take a seat and anxiously wait for her arrival.

I try to fidget with my phone but all I can do is aimlessly scroll. My hands feel a little clammy as I attempt to figure out what to do and how to behave when she arrives.

And then, all of a sudden, there she is. Walking through the restaurant toward me, she looks like a vision. In just a few steps, Josephine reaches the table and I help her take off her coat. Her bare shoulders glow like molten gold in the hazy light of the chandelier and all I can think of is how much I want to kiss them. Instead, I stand there, awestruck, admiring just how beautiful she is. Wrapped in a black, silk dress, all lace and straps, she is unbelievable. Her high heels click seductively on the marble floors and I am simply stunned.

“Hey, you...”

She wraps her long and soft arms around my neck, and I can smell a hint of lavender on her skin. I feel as if I’ve fallen into a dream. She kisses my cheek, sending shivers down my spine.

“I didn’t even know there was a restaurant here,” she says, looking around.

“It’s private. Only for members.”

“Ah ... so, it’s a billionaire thing?”

“It’s a Wall Street thing, actually. But I suppose you do need to have a certain income to be able to dine here,” I say, agreeing with her.

“I missed you,” she says softly, looking into my eyes.

I feel my heart skip a beat. “I missed you too, Jo,” I reply, my eyes fixed on hers.

We take a seat across from each other and I pour her a glass of red wine. We sip in silence for a moment, until she breaks the quiet.

“I’m sorry for asking you to meet me on such short notice,” she says, her eyes flickering with nervousness.

“Don’t be sorry,” I reply, taking her hand in mine. “I’m just glad that you felt comfortable enough to reach out to me.”

She looks at me, her eyes searching mine. “My job’s in jeopardy, Jacob,” she says, her voice shaking slightly. “I don’t know what to do.”

I can see the fear etched deep on her face. My heart aches for her. “Tell me what happened,” I ask, trying to soothe her.

She takes a deep breath and begins to explain the entire situation with Ms. Abadie in detail, sharing everything that’s happened between them since her very first day at Jameson

Juniper Hall. I listen intently, feeling my anger boil inside at the thought of someone trying to hurt Josephine.

“And today was the day I finally broke. I just ... *snapped*. It was like an out-of-body experience. I couldn't even control the words that came out of my mouth...” her voice trails off.

I feel a sense of protectiveness wash over me as I look at her. “Given the way she's been bullying you for months on end, I don't blame you for standing up for yourself,” I say, squeezing her hand reassuringly. “In fact, I'm proud of you for it.”

“But ... now it really feels like my job is on the line,” she says, her eyes filling with tears. “And if I get fired my parents are going to be right about me.”

I reach over and wipe away her tears with my thumb, gazing into her eyes. “You know that's not true, Jo.”

“But I'll have failed...”

“You haven't failed at anything,” I say firmly. “You're an amazing teacher. Your students, including Clem, think the world of you. And I think the world of you too.”

She looks at me with tear stained cheeks, a small smile forming at the corner of her lips. “Thank you, Jacob. You always know just what to say.”

“I'm just telling the truth.” I smile at her. “But Jo, I promise you, I'm going to do *everything* in my power to not let that happen.”

“I appreciate that Jacob but considering the way they came down on me over wearing the color *blue*, it's hard to imagine

—”

“Wait, it was Ms. Abadie who came down on you about the dress code, right?” I interject.

“Right, she said it was against the rules to wear blue. But conveniently, *she* was the one who forgot to send me the rules in advance.” She sighs.

“So how were you supposed to know it was a rule, then?”

“Well, that’s just it, Jacob. Stephanie told me on the first day of school that Ms. Abadie intentionally sabotages teachers. She was convinced Ms. Abadie forgot to send me the rules on purpose. I mean, shoot, if it weren’t for Stephanie, I never would have even received the rule book...”

“Wait ... do you mean to tell me Ms. Abadie never sent you the rule book? Even after she scolded you over the dress code?”

“No ... she didn’t. I just have the hard copy Stephanie gave me on the first day as a favor. But ... what are you getting at?”

“So, you didn’t have to sign any sort of contract or acknowledgement that you received the rule book and agree to abide by them?”

“No, Jacob, I didn’t,” she says, realization slowly dawning on her face.

“So ... there’s *no* evidence you ever even received the rules. Which means, *technically*, you’re not at fault for *not* knowing the rules, then. Rules which include ... dating a parent?”



I can almost feel the weight lifted from Josephine's shoulders as she realizes what I'm saying. "Oh my gosh, Jacob, you're right. I had no idea," she says, her voice filled with hope.

I smile at her. "Don't worry, Jo. We'll figure it out together. And in the meantime"—I pause, reaching out to take her hand once again—"I'd like to discuss a few things with you of my own."

Her eyes widen with curiosity. "What is it, Jacob?" she asks, leaning in slightly.

I take a deep breath, trying to muster up the courage to say what's been on my mind for months.

"Josephine, over the past several months, I've come to realize just how special you are. I love your kindness, your courage, your ambition ... the way you care for your students, and for my daughter. Your intellect, your passion, your determination to never give up on your dreams even if nobody else believes in them. You have an inner strength that draws me to you like a magnet. You're the embodiment of everything I've ever wanted in a partner. And these are just a few of the reasons why I have fallen madly in love with you." The words come tumbling out of my mouth as if they have a mind of their own.

As soon as the last syllable leaves my lips, I'm suddenly struck by immense vulnerability and fear.

Because this is the first time I've ever spoken these words to a woman since I lost my wife.

But Josephine's face lights up with a beautiful smile, and all of my fear melts away. "Oh, Jacob," she says, her voice filled with emotion. "I love you too. You're everything I could have ever asked for in a partner. You make me feel safe, and loved, and cherished, and I can't imagine spending even one more day without you by my side."

At that I take her face in my hands and kiss her deeply, pouring all my love and longing into the kiss. Josephine kisses me back with an intensity that I never imagined existed. It's as if every moment of hesitation and longing between us has been building up to this point and there's nothing left to do but give in to the overwhelming desire we have for each other.

The wine glasses clink as they're pushed aside, and suddenly our hands are everywhere; my fingers glide across the back of her neck, then up into her hair, hers are tracing the lines of my jaw.

I savor the sweetness of the wine on her lips as she deepens the kiss, parting her lips for me. We continue to taste and explore each other, our bodies moving closer and closer together until there's no space left.

It's like we've been waiting for this moment for a lifetime and I never want to let her go.

As we pull away, we're both breathless and flushed. Josephine looks up at me with a shy smile, and I can see the love and adoration shining in her eyes. "So, what do we do now?"

“Let’s tell the Headmaster everything tomorrow. I want to be with you, Jo. I don’t want anything, or anyone, to come between us, especially not Ms. Abadie,” I say, taking her hand and holding it tightly. “Given everything you told me tonight, I’m confident she has no grounds to fire you. If anything, Ms. Abadie is the one who should be fired.”

Josephine smiles, relief evident in her expression. “Thank you, Jacob. I could have never been strong enough to stand up to Ms. Abadie without you by my side.”

“Don’t thank me,” I say, running my thumb along her cheek. “You have been strong and brave all on your own. I’m just glad I was here to be a part of it.”

Josephine looks down and I follow her gaze to a delicate beaded bracelet on her wrist. The same one I saw Clem making last night. “Did Clem give you this?”

“Yes, she did. It’s a friendship bracelet.”

“Well, I think it looks beautiful on you,” I say, admiring the bracelet. “She really has taken a liking to you, you know.”

Josephine’s eyes light up. “She’s such a special girl, Jacob. I’m so glad that I get to be a part of her life.”

“And I’m so glad that you get to be a part of mine,” I say, pulling her into a tight embrace.

# Chapter Twenty-Six

## Josephine

“Good morning, Miss Andrews. I’ve been looking for you. There’s a meeting in the Headmaster’s office. You should go,” the receptionist says, intercepting me on the way to my second-period class.

“Oh, alright. Thanks for letting me know.”

I feel a sudden wave of anxiety wash over me, my mind is going a mile a minute. Jacob and I planned to approach the Headmaster today after school. Considering it’s 9 AM, I don’t think this meeting has anything to do with him.

I reluctantly make my way to the Headmaster’s office, my heart thumping audibly in my chest. I approach the polished oak door and knock softly, taking a deep breath and steeling myself for whatever may come.

“Come in,” he says, and I push the door open, stepping inside the room.

To my surprise, I see not only Mr. Thornton, the Headmaster himself, but Ms. Abadie as well.

Suddenly, I feel as if I'm going to faint.

“Please ... take a seat, Miss Andrews. We need to talk about something,” he says, gesturing for me to sit down.

I take the leather chair next to Ms. Abadie and opposite Mr. Thornton's desk. It makes a soft, squeaky sound—like high quality leather often does—which, in the silence of this grand office, seems amplified at least a hundred times over.

Next to me, Ms. Abadie has, what can only be described as, an evil grin plastered on her face, which makes my skin crawl.

My heart is almost in my throat now beating heavily and painfully.

“Miss Andrews, a few things have come to my attention this morning...” Mr Thornton begins.

The room is starting to spin, so I grab both armrests of the leather chair and hold tightly to them as if I'm on a plane that's rapidly crashing toward earth.

“I brought them to your attention, Headmaster Thornton!” she says emphatically.

*Oh, gosh, she's not even trying to hide it.*

“Ms. Abadie, please ... You'll have your turn to speak, believe me. But, for now, I'd like to hear what Miss Andrews has to say,” Headmaster Thornton says to Ms. Abadie, holding up his hand.

*It appears my worst fears are coming to fruition.*

He looks back at me. “As I was saying. It’s been brought to my attention that you—Miss Andrews—might be in some type of ... entanglement with one of the fathers here at Jameson Juniper Hall.”

My ears start to ring.

I try to focus on what he’s saying but his face is now swimming in and out.

“Miss Andrews? Did you understand what I just said?”

“Mhm.”

“Could you, please, tell me if that is true or not?”

“Headmaster Thornton ... I really don’t know what Ms. Abadie has told you...”

“It doesn’t matter what she told me. I’m asking you, Miss Andrews. Some serious accusations have been made against you and I need to know your position before we move forward.”

I cannot move. I cannot speak. I cannot even breathe anymore.

He reminds me of my father who used to belittle me for not doing my homework, or my mother chastising me for getting jam all over my summer dress when I was little. And while I’m aware that I’m an adult now, in a professional environment, my body cannot react—I’m simply frozen.

“Oh, come on! Look at her! Look how she’s just sitting there like a deer in the headlights trying to impress you with those big eyes! You’re not *actually* falling for this act, are you, Headmaster? For this farce, for this—”

“Ms. Abadie, please,” he interjects. “lower your voice.”

I can imagine the secretary outside the office listening with her ear pressed against the door. Oh, the things she’s going to say about me to everyone in the school.

Not that it matters, anyway. Ms. Abadie will take care of that herself.

Honestly everyone here as well as every single teacher in Boston and in the state of Massachusetts will find out about this soon enough. They’ll *all* know that I’m the literature instructor who...

My hands begin to shake even though I’m still holding tightly to the armrests of the leather chair.

“Miss Andrews? I’m afraid that I’m going to need an official statement from you on this so that I know how to proceed,” he says calmly.

Next to me, Ms. Abadie frets like a ferret in a bucket. “Come on! Out with it already!” she snaps.

“Ms. Abadie, *I’m* the one asking the questions,” Headmaster Thornton calmly intervenes.

“I’m part of this!” she insists.

“Part of what?” I finally manage to say. “Part of what, exactly? Did you do something that you’d like to share with Headmaster Thornton?”

Ms. Abadie exhales sharply and slams her hand on her own armrest. It makes an almost wet, slapping sound. “That’s it! That is ... it! Do you see? Do you see, Headmaster, how she mocks me? How she taunts me? She did it in front of the school mascot and then in a classroom full of children! See?” She growls.

“The school mascot is a living, breathing student whom you bullied to no end in front of the entire cricket match. As for the classroom full of students, you came in, unannounced, banged the door open, scared the children, interrupted my class, and told me that you were conducting an impromptu inspection. Which I graciously allowed, until you, again, interrupted, by asking nonsensical questions. After you left, I had to apologize to the children because I was afraid of what they might tell their parents!”

“Is this true, Ms. Abadie?” the Headmaster asks her as he makes copious notes. “You never told me any of this. When did this happen? At the cricket match and...”

“Absolutely not,” Ms. Abadie replies, turning scarlet in the face. She rubs her hands together frantically and almost jumps out of her seat, trying to see what the Headmaster is writing in his personal notes.

I take a deep breath, realizing Headmaster Thornton has proven himself to be an objective and fair man, who doesn’t



seem to want to be swayed by gossip and ill will.

“Miss Andrews, we do need to address this situation. The accusations that Ms. Abadie has made against you are very serious, as I trust you know. Please tell me what is your stance on all this?”

“Headmaster Thornton, I meant to talk to you about this...”

“That’s it! That’s enough! Look—I saw them, okay? I saw them cuddled up in the teacher’s lounge during the talent show on the first of December!”

The Headmaster is stunned and looks to me for answers.

“Is this ... true? Did you ... engage in physical activities with a parent on school grounds during one of the school events? While the students were here?”

“I did show a parent where the hot chocolate was but ... I can assure you there was no cuddling involved.”

“Ms. Abadie, why would you even say something like this in the absence of proof?” The Headmaster turns to her.

“Well, I don’t have any proof of their canoodling, but I *do* have *this!*” She opens her purse and pulls out a stack of papers and shoves them in the Headmaster’s face.

They don’t look like much so I try not to allow panic to take over me again.

“Ms. Abadie ... really now. What is this?”

“You wanted proof? Here it is! These are emails between Miss Andrews and Mr. Jacob Carlton. In which she asks him

to the cricket event, in which they flirt ... All of them on the school's emailing system which, as you know, I manage! *Now* do you believe that they also are having an *affair?!?*" She turns to me and grins, sending a chill through my bones.

The Headmaster quickly goes through the handful of emails that have, indeed, been exchanged between myself and Jacob and shakes his head in shock.

If the ground could open right now and swallow me whole, I would gladly do it myself, and never come back out.

"How could you, Miss Andrews?"

As I gather my thoughts, the door to Headmaster Thornton's office swings open, and Jacob stumbles in, breathless, and red in the face.

# Chapter Twenty-Seven

## Jacob

I slam the door behind me. The slam is so sudden—so loud—that the room immediately falls silent.

Josephine, Headmaster Thornton, and Ms. Abadie all turn to stare at me. Behind them, I can see my reflection in the glass panes of a trophy case, which are still trembling from the reverberations of the slammed door.

I approach the desk and position myself firmly between Josephine and Ms. Abadie, then glare upon Headmaster Thornton.

Josephine looks shocked—to be fair, she’s never seen me this upset in all the time we’ve known each other. She also probably wasn’t expecting to see me here. But based on what I sense may be happening right now in the Headmaster’s office, I’m glad I made it here as soon as I did.

“I received your email, Mr. Thornton. You said I needed to come to the school immediately due to inappropriate relations

with the teaching staff?”

As soon as I saw that ridiculous email from Thornton, I sprinted almost twenty blocks to make it here in time. There was no point taking a car—too much gridlock traffic. I knew that even my own chauffeur, who used to work as a stunt car driver, could not reasonably be expected to get me here as fast as I required.

Thankfully, I run ten miles every morning, so needless to say I’m in great shape. I’m beginning to wonder if all those daily, morning runs were training me for this very moment.

“Ah, Mr. Carlton. I’m so happy that you received my email,” the Headmaster says. “You are, indeed, right on time, to watch your ... acquaintance, Miss Andrews get fired.”

“This is a joke, Thornton,” I say, as I tower over him. “And unfortunately for you, I do not find this ... joke ... to be particularly amusing.”

Headmaster Thornton shrinks back in his chair. He looks at me, before he exchanges a cold and distant glance with Ms. Abadie.

“Mr. Carlton,” he begins, folding his hands and placing them squarely in his lap, “I am sorry to inform you, but this is not a joke in the slightest. You heard me correctly. Ms. Abadie, here, submitted a formal complaint against you. The email I sent you was as serious as it gets. Now, please sit down and we will begin the paperwork needed to release your daughter from this school today.”

He really must be joking if he thinks I'm going to take a seat.

"I don't understand. What does my daughter have to do with any of this?"

"Mr. Carlton, once news of this *scandal* between you and Miss Andrews gets out—and it will—every parent in this school will descend upon me like vultures. They'll accuse Miss Andrews of preferential treatment toward your daughter given the nature of your ... relationship. Every good grade she gets, every award ... all will be questioned if she actually earned it or was it influenced by Miss Andrews. For that reason alone, we must expel her. I'm sorry, but our school takes these kinds of accusations very seriously."

"You're firing my daughter's teacher and expelling my child from this school on the basis of an accusation from Ms. Abadie? A woman who has been clearly trying to sabotage Miss Andrews from the moment she arrived here?"

Headmaster Thornton clears his throat and adjusts his tie nervously, while Ms. Abadie shifts uncomfortably in her seat. Josephine, still shocked by my sudden appearance, remains quiet, but her eyes are wide and sympathetic.

"Mr. Carlton, I assure you that we take all complaints seriously, regardless of who they come from."

"Then I'd like to submit a formal complaint against Ms. Abadie. And I suggest you take the time to investigate this situation properly before making any rash decisions." My tone is calm, but my eyes are ablaze with anger. "Ms. Abadie has a

personal vendetta against Miss Andrews and is clearly using her position to cause trouble. I refuse to stand by and let her get away with it.”

Headmaster Thornton swallows hard. He stammers for a moment before regaining his composure.

“Very well, Mr. Carlton. However, I cannot simply overlook the evidence that has been presented to me. These emails between you and Miss Andrews, they are quite suggestive. And as the Headmaster of this institution, I cannot condone any inappropriate behavior between parents and staff members. It sets a poor example for our students and is against school policy,” he says, handing me the stack of papers.

I look over the emails, resisting the urge to roll my eyes. “I was unaware there was a school policy against playful banter and harmless flirtation between two consenting adults.”

Ms. Abadie snorts and interjects. “Playful banter and harmless flirtation? Is that what you call it, Mr. Carlton? From the emails I saw, it looked like *much* more than that.”

I feel my blood boil at the thought of this woman going through my private emails. But I force myself to stay calm. “If you had bothered to read the context of those emails, Ms. Abadie, you would see that there was nothing inappropriate about them.”

Headmaster Thornton scratches his chin as he considers our arguments. “I must say, Mr. Carlton, I am surprised to hear that someone of your stature would engage in such unprofessional behavior.”

I clasp my hands behind my back, trying to contain my rage. “With all due respect, Headmaster, my personal life is not up for debate here. The only thing that matters is whether or not Miss Andrews has violated school policy. Who is in charge of distributing the school policy to staff members, by the way?” I ask, turning to Ms. Abadie.

Her eyes flicker with annoyance, but she answers readily enough. “I am responsible for distributing the staff handbook at the beginning of each school year.”

“And did you also provide Miss Andrews with a copy of this handbook?” I ask.

The office is now eerily silent.

Ms. Abadie, usually bold as brass, can’t find a single word to say.

Josephine’s eyes light up as Headmaster Thornton turns to Ms. Abadie and asks her the same question. “Did you send her a copy of the handbook?”

Ms. Abadie shifts uncomfortably in her seat, her eyes darting around the room as if searching for a way out. Finally, she speaks up. “I ... I’m not sure if she received a copy. I may have forgotten to give it to her.”

I raise an eyebrow. “You may have forgotten? That seems like a critical error on your part, Ms. Abadie. It’s no wonder Miss Andrews might not have been aware of certain policies.”

Josephine clears her throat. “If I may interject for a moment, Headmaster Thornton, I don’t recall receiving a staff

handbook from Ms. Abadie.”

Thornton looks surprised. “Is that so?”

Josephine nods. “Yes, in fact, I showed up on the first day wearing the color blue because I had no knowledge of the dress code restrictions. Ms. Abadie was the first to reprimand me for it, but I never received any emails from her regarding the school policies.”

Headmaster Thornton furrows his brow and turns to Ms. Abadie. “Is this true?”

Ms. Abadie looks like a deer caught in headlights. “Well, I— I may have overlooked a few staff members. It’s a big school, you know.”

“Overlooked a few staff members?” I scoff. “It seems to me like you’ve been deliberately neglecting your duties, Ms. Abadie.”

She bristles at my accusation. “How dare you! I have been working at this school for fifteen years, and I have always taken my responsibilities seriously. If anything, I deserve a *promotion*.”

She stares at the Headmaster and then at Josephine, clearly dumbfounded by how swiftly this situation went from being her greatest victory to her worst nightmare.

Headmaster Thornton shakes his head in disbelief. “As the head of this institution, I take the proper dissemination of our policies very seriously. It is unacceptable that Miss Andrews did not receive a copy of our staff handbook from you. I



cannot, in good conscience, hold her accountable for violating a policy she never received.”

I let out a sigh of relief.

It seems that justice has prevailed, for now at least.

“That said, I am concerned about the accusations I’ve heard today about your conduct, Ms. Abadie,” he continues. “It seems that there are some serious issues that need to be addressed here.”

Ms. Abadie’s cheeks flush as she crosses her arms over her chest. “I can assure you that all of my actions have been in the best interest of this school and its students.”

“Bullying teachers and trying to ruin careers is not in the best interest of anyone, Ms. Abadie,” I say, my voice stern and unwavering.

Headmaster Thornton nods in agreement. “I think it’s time we take a closer look at Ms. Abadie’s behavior and conduct, and make sure that she is adhering to the principles and values of this institution. Please, Mr. Carlton, take a seat and let’s discuss the events both you and Miss Andrews previously mentioned.”

Ms. Abadie stands up abruptly, her chair screeching across the floor. “You can’t do this to me! This is a witch hunt! You’re all against me!” She snaps.

Amidst her chaotic protest, Ms. Abadie reaches to the desk and grabs a framed photo of Headmaster Thornton and his family off his desk and chucks it across the room at the wall.

Everyone is stunned into silence as the frame shatters, and the photo falls to the ground in a pile of broken glass.

Ms. Abadie's chest heaves up and down as she pants, anger contorting her features. I can see now that she's not just malicious—she's unhinged.

I hold my ground, standing between her and Josephine.

Headmaster Thornton's face has gone red with fury. "That's it, Ms. Abadie. I've seen enough. You're fired, effective immediately. Security will escort you out of the building."

Ms. Abadie continues to rage and spout expletives as two burly security officers enter the room and take her by the arms, dragging her out of the office and down the hallway.

As soon as the door slams shut behind them, relief washes over me.

*I never want to see that woman again.*

Headmaster Thornton clears his throat. "Miss Andrews, I sincerely apologize for accusing you of violating our school policy without a proper investigation."

Josephine nods her appreciation, a small smile forming on her lips.

"You are free to continue teaching here at our school as long as you uphold our policies," he says.

"Thank you, Mr. Thornton. I am very passionate about teaching and I want to continue doing my best for the students."

Headmaster Thornton smiles in response. “I’m glad to hear that, Miss Andrews. It seems you have found a friend here in Mr. Carlton.” He gestures toward me.

I look at Josephine, who’s now standing closely beside me.

“About that, Mr. Thornton,” Josephine says. “I must confess to you that, before I knew it was forbidden to date a parent at Jameson Juniper Hall, I had already developed feelings for Mr. Carlton.”

Headmaster Thornton raises an eyebrow, intrigued. “Is that so, Mr. Carlton? And what do you have to say about this?”

“Yes, it’s true, Mr. Thornton. Miss Andrews—that is to say, *Josephine*—and I, are in a stable and committed relationship. This is not just some ... *affair* like Ms. Abadie led you to believe. We love each other and I have serious plans to ask Josephine to marry me. That said, I feel rather confident that she’ll become my wife—assuming she says yes of course.”

The Headmaster’s eyes go wide with surprise. I look at Josephine, whose face has turned ghost white—but she’s also giving me the biggest, brightest smile I’ve ever seen.

“Miss Andrews? Is this true?” the Headmaster asks her.

“Yes, it’s true. Jacob and I are completely committed to each other. But, I want to assure you that I will continue to uphold the professionalism and integrity expected of me as a teacher at this school,” Josephine says, her voice full of conviction.

“Well ... I must say, in my thirty years at Jameson Juniper Hall, this is a *first* for me.” He chuckles. “Our school policy

against relationships between teachers and parents was made to prevent inappropriate relationships, affairs, and ethical breaches—but ... now that I have all the facts, I see no such case here.”

Josephine and I exchange a relieved glance.

“Given the unprecedented circumstances, I’ll of course need to conduct a special review of Clementine’s work as she finishes out the school year with Miss Andrews to avoid any potential conflicts of interest.” He pauses and looks at us again. “So long as everything is handled professionally, I don’t see any reason why your relationship should be an issue.” He smiles. “In the meantime, you both have my full support. I’ll work with the board of directors to make some much needed updates to the rule book. Perhaps, we can even allow the color blue.” He winks.

Josephine’s hand slips into mine, her thumb rubbing soothing circles on the back of my hand. “Thank you, Headmaster Thornton. We appreciate your understanding and support,” she says.

As we leave Headmaster Thornton’s office hand in hand, I look at Josephine, who’s wearing a radiant smile, and I feel a surge of love for her.

*I can’t believe how lucky I am to have her by my side.*

“Are you okay?” I ask her, squeezing her hand.

“I’m more than okay,” she says, looking up at me with adoration in her eyes. “I’m overjoyed. I can’t believe we’re

finally able to be together, openly and honestly.”

Once we're alone in the parking lot, I pull her close, caressing the side of her face. She trembles at my touch. “Did you mean what you said, Jacob? About wanting to marry me?”

I pull her closer, pressing a tender kiss to her forehead. “Every word, Jo. I've never been more sure of anything in my life. I want you to be my wife.”

She buries her face in my chest, her body shaking with emotion. “I love you. So much.”

“I love you too. More than anything.” I lift her face up to mine gaze deeply into her emerald eyes.

“Please ... kiss me...” she utters hungrily.

I kiss her forehead, then work my way down the bridge of her nose, gently kissing the freckles that are sprinkled across it. I take my time exploring the soft skin of her face, memorizing every curve and angle with my lips. I trail kisses along her cheekbone, as her breath hitches in her chest. Josephine parts her lips for me in anticipation, and I oblige, capturing her mouth with mine in a passionate, fiery kiss.

She tastes like honey and cinnamon, and I lose myself in her as she moans into my mouth. My hands trail down her back, pulling her closer to me. The heat between us is palpable, everything else fades away as our bodies meld together as if they were made for each other.

“Get a room!” A voice from behind snickers.

Josephine and I laugh as we reluctantly pull away from each other and look toward the giggling teenage boy—it's the same boy who wore the parrot costume at the cricket match.

“Go lay an egg!” I call out, giving him a pointed look. The boy scurries away with a wave, but not before I catch the smirk on his face. I shake my head in amusement.

“Looks like our secret's out,” I say, pulling her closer to me.

Josephine grins up at me, her eyes sparkling. “I think I'm okay with that,” she says, leaning in to give me another kiss

At this moment, I know I'm exactly where I'm supposed to be.

I'm filled with a joy that I never thought was possible, thanks to the wonderful woman in my arms.

And I'm never letting her go.

# Epilogue

Josephine

## **Six Months Later**

“How is this a real house?” Larisa gasps. “I mean ... are you *sure* we’re at the right address, Emmy?”

“Well, we’re already inside so ... if we’re at the wrong address, they’re either going to call the cops or set the dogs on us.” Emmy laughs.

“Or both...”

“Can I help you find what you’re looking for, ladies?”

“Umm ... and who might you be?” Larisa asks, eyeing the butler from head to toe.

“I’m Jarvis, the butler of Carlton House. And I’m here to serve you—Miss Larisa, Miss Emmy.”

I stop at the top of the grand staircase and watch this funny exchange. The butler gives both my friends a deep bow each which makes them giggle madly.

They're here to celebrate Jacob and my first anniversary. Jacob *insisted* that he host a charity gala at his home with all our closest friends to commemorate the occasion that fate brought us together, and I happily obliged.

"Oh, my gosh, he bowed to us! He knows our names!" they whisper to each other. And considering I can hear them from the top of the stairs, I'm certain Jarvis can hear them as well. But he's far too polite to say anything.

"Of course, he knows your names. You're only my best friends, after all!" I interject. My friends jump and turn around, running up the stairs to greet me.

We meet in the middle and hug tightly, holding the embrace as long as possible.

"We've missed you so much, Jo ... you have no idea!"

"I was only gone for three weeks." I chuckle.

"And how was your European vacation with Jacob and Clem?" Emmy asks.

"It was an absolute dream. I would *love* to take you both to Italy sometime."

"Oh, my gosh, yes! That would be amazing!" Larisa exclaims, bouncing on her heels. "I've *always* wanted to photograph Italy for my portfolio."



“Sign me up, too! I’ve always wanted to try real Italian pizza,” Emmy adds, grinning from ear to ear.

“I’ll make sure to take you to the best pizzerias in all of Italy,” I promise them, smiling warmly.

“We’re glad you’re home, bestie.” Emmy squeezes my shoulder.

“I’ll say, it feels good to be back in Boston ... and speaking of being back, Emmy, Larisa ... I have some news,” I say.

They both look at me with excitement in their eyes.

“What is it? Don’t keep us waiting!” Larisa exclaims.

“I’m officially unemployed—I quit my job as a literature instructor at Jameson Juniper Hall.”

My friends look surprised at the sudden announcement. “You did what? When did this happen? Are you okay, Jo?”

I take a deep breath and nod. “Yes, I’m alright. I submitted my formal resignation yesterday. After much consideration, it really felt like the right thing to do for me and my future.” They nod, listening intently as I continue. “Honestly, I don’t really know if a private school was ever the place for me. After everything that happened—all the drama with Ms. Abadie—I had a long and very honest talk with Jacob about it all.”

“How did it go?”

“It helped me realize that the only reason I was forcing myself to teach at the best private school in America was ... to

impress my parents. I guess I was just hoping that, somehow, if I had this amazing career at a prestigious school, they would ... be proud of me. So, I pushed myself.” I sigh. “But now, I’m happy to report that I’m done with all of that. I may look for another teaching job elsewhere in the future. But for now, I’m taking a leap of faith—following my heart and being brave—and I’m finally going to focus on finishing my novel.”

My friends smile knowingly and wrap me in a tight hug.

“That’s the Jo we know and love!” Larisa says.

“I’m so proud of you,” Emmy says.

“Thank you. You girls know better than anyone that I’ve always dreamed of being an author. It’s originally what I set out to do when I first started college.”

“I know! I remember you started working on your manuscript even back then!” Emmy declares.

“Yes! And Europe was *so* inspiring for me—with all its beauty and rich history. I started writing again while I was there, and it reminded me where my passion truly lies. So after thoughtful consideration, I *finally* decided it’s time to take the plunge and really pursue a career in writing. I have enough savings from my time at Jameson Juniper Hall to make it happen.”

“Oh, gosh, stop ... you’re making me cry and I spent *so* much money on this makeup,” Emmy says.

We hug again and I can feel the love radiating off them. It’s the number one reason why I’ve always felt both Emmy and

Larisa are my sisters.

“Okay, now can we talk about this dress?” Larisa looks at me from head to toe and gently lifts one of the folds of the champagne-colored dress. It sparkles in the June afternoon light as if the entire surface is covered in diamonds.

“You look ... incredible. I can’t even find the right words to describe it. You have got to let me photograph you,” she says, pulling her camera out of her bag.

“Of course, go ahead.” I twirl around, enjoying the weight of the fabric as it swishes around me. She snaps a few photos of me, perfectly capturing the joy and excitement of the moment.

“Is this dress ... Gucci or what?” Larisa asks.

“Oh, no. Miuccia designed especially for me for this occasion.”

“Miuccia? Miuccia who?”

“Miuccia Prada,” I reply, feeling myself blushing a little.

“The Miuccia Prada? As in Miu Miu? As in, one of the most famous designers of all time made a dress especially for you and your anniversary party?” Emmy says, entirely stunned.

“Jacob and I met Miuccia when we were in Paris ... and umm ... she came up with this idea.”

“Oh, my gosh!” Emmy squeals. “Who are you and what have you done with Josephine Andrews? Not even a year ago, the three of us were sitting on the floor in your little apartment, drinking cheap wine, and stressing about ... everything.”

“I know! I mean, aside from still living in that tiny apartment ... pretty much *everything* else has changed. Honestly, I feel like an entirely new person. It took hitting rock bottom to finally figure out what I want in life. But now, I’m so much better for it, and *so* much stronger.”

“You sure are, friend. I’m so proud of you. You took a chance on love, and now you’re taking a chance on your career. I’m confident that you’ll achieve anything you set your mind to,” Larisa says, a tear pricking the corner of her eye.

“And now ... you’re wearing a dress that probably cost more than my car, and you’re in a relationship with a billionaire who lives in a house that I honestly don’t think is even real.” Emmy laughs.

This last remark genuinely makes me laugh.

“What makes you say that, Em?”

“I mean ... this is not a house. It’s a hotel! Do you even know how many rooms there are? And what does Jacob do with all of them? And it’s got *three* pools. What does anyone need three pools for—”

“Wait until you see the library,” I interject, before leading my friends down the stairs and into the foyer of Jacob’s mansion. We pass through the grand hallway and into the library—a place that must be seen to be believed.

My friends’ jaws drop as they take in the enormous room, lined with floor to ceiling bookshelves filled with an impressive selection of literature from all over the world.

Every single inch of the space is occupied by some sort of book, map or artifact. Even more astonishing than the vast diversity and sheer size of this collection is the fact that each item has been meticulously placed on its respective shelf with precision and care—it's almost as if Jacob knows exactly where to find any book he wants in seconds.

“Miss Josephine? The guests are starting to arrive.” Jarvis interrupts us with his announcement.

“Oh, alright. But ... Jacob isn't here yet. Have you heard from him?”

“No, Miss, I'm sorry.” He gives a bow and leaves.

“I have no idea whatsoever what's happening. I've been trying to call him, text, email ... you name it—all afternoon. And nothing. He's not picking up, he's not answering. I mean, Jacob told me that he has a big meeting today, but ... this? Our guests are here and I have to receive them all by myself. It's our anniversary party...”

“You're not alone, you have us! Come on, we're the three musketeers! I mean, I know we're not Jacob, but I think we can receive some guests,” Emmy says and refreshes her lipstick.

My heart lifts a little and I agree.

In the main dining hall, a crowd of people has already gathered. Theo, Jacob's best friend and partner is already here, which is a little strange since Jacob himself is still at work.

My stress levels rise again, but I try to brush it off.

Stephanie waves at me and I try to signal to her that I must greet everyone before I have a chance to stop and chat. She gives me the thumbs up and then stuffs three jumbo shrimp in her mouth. *A girl after my own heart.*

There are many other people here whom I don't know personally, but I do understand they're business partners of Jacob's. When we made the guest list together, Jacob explained that it's a sign of respect to invite them to these types of social functions.

I have no issue with that.

Just as I finish greeting the guests, a small hand grabs the folds of my dress and fluffs it prettily, making it seem like I'm a princess. I turn around and see Clem playing with the shiny fabric against the light, mesmerized by it.

"Hey, sweet girl, what are you doing down there?"

"I *love* this dress. I should have had Miuccia Prada make me an identical one when we were in Paris so that we could match!"

I smile down at her and say, "Maybe we can do that on our next trip to Paris." I wink.

Clem nods excitedly.

"Besides, your outfit is *amazing*," I tell her. In classic Clem fashion, she's wearing a bright pink tutu and a top made of sequins. It's chic and playful, just like her.

I look up and see Jarvis coming my way with a smile on his face. "Jacob is here. He asked that you meet him in the

garden.”

I thank Jarvis for letting me know and grab Clem by the hand. Together we practically run across the terrace and down the stairs into the garden to meet Jacob.

But when we arrive, I gasp at the sight before me.

*I can't believe what I'm seeing.*

There are hundreds of life-sized sculptures, characters from all my favorite books, waiting for me among immense arrangements of yellow orchids and gargantuan piles of Turkish Delight.

I move a little closer to this fairy tale and notice a yellow brick road and a sign meant just for me.

*Come find me, Josephine...*

*Follow the yellow brick road!*

I step foot on it and immediately get lost in a sea of stories.

The more I advance, the more I see.

Here is Captain Ahab, forever battling his white whale. On the left is Gatsby, staring across the water and endlessly waiting for his Daisy. I wave, even though I know it's just a statue. Over there, between flowers and candy is Alice, running after the White Rabbit.

I continue to walk and I meet Anna Karenina. She looks so lifelike that I almost want to stop her from meeting her fate but I'm on another journey. A journey of my own.

I spot Achilles and Hector, fighting before the walls of Troy in a spectacular show that has come alive right from the pages of *The Iliad* and then I see Hamlet, caught in a frozen moment, eternally uttering his famous speech.

I am *mesmerized* as I follow the yellow path toward the center of this magical space. A curtain of yellow orchids hangs from a place I cannot see.

*What will I find?*

I push it to the side and there he is.

My heart sings and is ready to take flight. Just as I'm about to jump into Jacob's arms, I see him kneel.

My breath is caught in my very throat as he opens a small, velvet box.

Inside, an oval diamond shines like white fire between two magnificent emeralds.

"Josephine ... my love, my princess, the heroine of all my books and all my stories. Fate brought us together, but love has kept us bound. Will you do me the honor of becoming my wife?"

I'm speechless as I stare at Jacob, my heart beating so hard it might burst. The man of my dreams is proposing, and I can't believe it.

I look down at Clementine, who's staring wide-eyed at the ring. She looks up at me with a huge grin on her face. "Say yes! Say yes, Mom!"



I feel a surge of love and gratitude wash over me.

“Yes! Of course, of course! Yes!” I finally say, tears of joy streaming down my face. Jacob places the ring on my finger and Clem jumps into our arms.

“I love you so much, Jo!”

“I love you more, Jacob!”

“What about me?” Clem says.

“We love you the most!” We laugh and hug, basking in the moment of pure bliss.

Then, Jacob pulls out a small box and passes it to Clem with a mischievous smile on his face. “This is for you, Clem. It’s just a tiny token of my appreciation for you being the best daughter ever.”

She excitedly takes the box and peeks inside it. Her eyes brighten as she pulls out VIP concert tickets with backstage passes to BTS.

“Thank you, Daddy! Thank you so much! You’re the best!” She squeals and hugs Jacob tightly. “I got a mommy *and* BTS tickets. This is the best day ever!”

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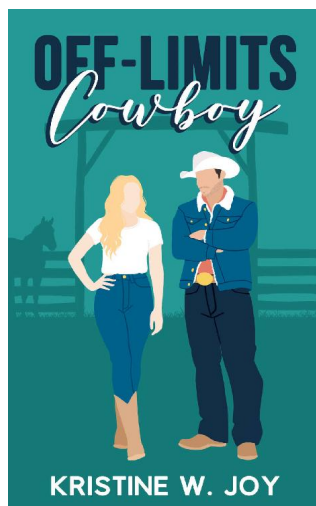
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**He's a grumpy cowboy and a single dad. He's also my overprotective brother's best friend... and when I agreed to stay at his ranch, falling for him was never in the plan.**

While standing in the barn, I feel myself drawing closer to him, willingly closing what little space is between us. The chemistry is palpable. Sparks are exploding.

My brother is going to *kill* us. But I can't bring myself to pull away. Seeing him, I've managed to forget the heartbreak from my divorce.

In my head, I know pursuing anything beyond a friendship with him is asking for *trouble*. I came here to get back on my feet... But in my heart, I secretly hope he sweeps me off 'em.

*Off-Limits Cowboy is a sweet and swoony small-town romcom with plenty of sizzle while keeping the bedroom door closed. It's the first standalone story in Kristine W. Joy's romcom series following the Brothers of Lucky Seven Ranch.*

Let's Connect

## **I'd love to connect with you!**

- Follow me on Instagram @KristineWJoy
- Subscribe to my newsletter so we can keep in touch. You'll be the first to hear about new releases and sales. I also frequently send swoony excerpts of my works in progress, life updates, and FREE books.
- I can also be found on BookBub and Goodreads @KristineWJoy



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# About the Author

Kristine W. Joy is an Amazon Bestselling Author who loves creating sweet and swoony stories full of sizzling chemistry and laugh-out-loud banter. She prefers her coffee iced and her kisses hot. When she's not dreaming up romance novels or writing from a cozy coffee shop in Northern California, she is spending time with her hubby and toddler. Becoming a published author was a lifelong dream. Becoming a momma was the inspiration to make it a reality.