

A photograph of a muscular man from the waist up, shirtless, wearing a dark grey necktie and black trousers with a black belt. He is standing in front of a green chalkboard. The word 'SCHOOL' is written vertically in white, stylized, hand-drawn letters on the chalkboard. A blue chalk eraser is visible on the chalkboard ledge below the text.

SCHOOL

Raelynn Blue

Schooled
RaeLynn Blue

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Schooled

A novel of erotic romance by

RAELYNN BLUE

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Chapter One

Wednesday, James Tennison Middle School

Harper Perry despised the annual parent-teacher conference. A ten year veteran of the open warfare between students and parents, to which the United States government had declared those in her profession Public Enemy Number One, Harper groaned at the prospect of getting into a skirmish tonight. The battle of blame had been marked on her calendar in red. She'd had plenty of warning and time to prepare. Nevertheless, she could feel the knot of tension and stress take refuge in the base of her neck and throb to a rancorous rhythm all its own. She knew with absolute certainty that by night's end, it would emerge like a monster, tearing through her usual calm and tranquility with scary accuracy and deadly consequences.

Like the loss of her professionalism.

Harper fidgeted and awaited the first hurling verbal assault bomb to begin the start of a long night. Her feet ached and her back hummed in soft agony. She'd been at the school since six-thirty that morning and now, she had an additional three hours of school-related engagement to contend with.

"You're hoping against hope, you know," Carlita advised. "His parents don't ever show. Kids like him don't have parents who get out of their beds and drive to visit the likes of us."

Harper sighed from behind the table. She watched the scores of students clutching their portfolios and walking to the bleachers. The sprinkling of parents slipped into the gym. Whispers and nervous twitches moved through the warm forced air, and Harper suppressed the grimace threatening to sour her face. She sipped her bottled water, washing the hunk of anticipation back into the pit of her stomach.

“Scott Pearson’s parents show up yet?” Mark Shoemaker asked, sliding his metal folding chair over to their table with a screeching scream as a soundtrack. The special education teacher, Mark co-taught classes with Harper, the team’s language arts teacher, and Carlita, who taught math. Despite co-teaching the two content areas, Mark’s actual caseload came to a whopping twelve students.

Dwarfed by the paper box crammed with Harper’s and Carlita’s folders, Mark’s student portfolios sat latched together by a thick rubber band.

Harper bit back a bitter retort. She had sixty-five students to his twelve.

“It’s only two minutes after five,” Carlita snapped, rolling her large ginger eyes. “Come on, Mark, at least pretend you think the kid’s parents are coming.”

“Why give false hope?” he replied, stretching like a lazy cat. His blonde hair had begun to lose its sun-kissed highlights, turning instead to the dirty dishwater shade of his other strands.

Carlita actually snorted.

Teachers at the surrounding tables shot them warning glances and one even shushed them. Somber tones and fake laughter drifted among the pockets of three-teacher teams spread throughout the gym. Harper and Carlita also had a science/social studies teacher, but she was out on maternity to leave. The long-term substitute had opted out of attending the event, leaving their team down to two-and-a-half team members.

Harper sighed as one of her star students, brightly scrubbed and expensively dressed, bounced over to their table with parents in tow. The daughter presented a complete copy of the father, down to the dimple in their right cheeks.

“Come for the report card,” the father said, way too happy for Harper’s taste.

She erased the scowl on her face and muttered some polite noises. The student’s mother joined in, and thus the game began.

For the next hour of her life—to which she would never ever get back—Harper flashed the high-wattage, no-warmth smile and shook hands with people she’d only see once this year. Students snatched their report cards and scampered to the outlying edges of the gym, far from the teachers’ tables tucked in

its center. The students hopped around with their parents tethered behind them, attempting to corner them long enough for explanations and congratulations.

"God, I hate this," Carlita sighed as a temporary reprieve arose from the lack of fresh parents. "Come on, seven-thirty."

"And to think we get to do it all again tomorrow," Mark added, reclining in his folding chair as if at the beach. "Back here at seven-fifteen in the morning."

Carlita snorted again, and Harper pressed her fingertips to her temples where the ball of stress had split and crawled painfully up to these new locations. She opened her eyes, and through thin slits she could make out the doorway of the gym. More people had arrived.

Why do all the parents seem to wear that same smile? The plastered-on-with-glue-stick farce that they believed hid their pain. Why? Show the whole world you hate this shit as much as I do. Don't fake it. They're not paying you to sham it up. Be real.

"At least it doesn't smell like wet socks or feet in here like last year," Mark was saying as Harper tuned back in to the conversation around her. His fingers drummed in absolute boredom.

"What?" Harper coughed out.

Mark rolled his eyes. "Never mind."

"Oh, did you hear about Scott's latest attack against education today?" asked Carlita with all the suspense of one who enjoyed gossiping immensely. "Down in art class?"

Harper screwed up her face and said, "Not really, Car. The boy is always in trouble. No home training, respect for authority figures, or any responsibility. His homework is nonexistent, and contacting his parents..." She shrugged unable to finish. Talking about Scott only managed to make her blood pressure high and the cadence of the headache at her temples pound.

"It's like trying to find a virgin on prom night," Mark concluded for her. "I know. Social worker has been trying to pin down the mother for weeks. No luck."

"Anyway, Ms. Turner told me that in art today, Scott—"

"I need a break," Harper confessed and scooted her chair back with a loud scrape on the gym's once-polished wood floor. Finding her water bottle empty, she seized the opportunity to

flee. She didn't wait to hear the story or even want to engage in any more conversation about Scott Pearson's deviant behavior. The boy should be locked in a group home if his parents were so damn inconsiderate as to allow him to rear himself.

Waving politely to the other teachers, Harper took out a small pill container from her pocket. Not normally a medicine taker, this pill case came out only once a year—for conferences. The bottle contained the sweet nectar of surviving the next hour and a half, pain reliever.

She had stopped at the water fountain, tossed in the two ivory capsules, and sucked in a bunch of water to send them on their way, when she spied a man emerging through the front doorway.

Wow.

The word smacked her psyche like it owned it. A male with tousled honey-brown hair, a body rippling—literally—beneath a tight, slightly dusty white tee-shirt, and hardened thighs that threatened the seams of faded, well worn jeans. The baseball hat cast a disturbing shadow over his face, hiding his eyes. Harper swallowed hard, so noisily she thought the little sixth grade student who scuttled by heard her. As the hunk passed her, reeking of sweat and musk and raw masculinity, Harper eyes attached to his ass so quickly, her neck complained. Her heart, hell, her clit didn't. She suppressed a squeal as his ass, snugly clad in those tight, terrific jeans came into view. That perfect ass would feel hard in her greedy hands.

Hmmm, damn, that's a photographic ass right there. What is a man like him doing at a thing like this?

She shook her head and sighed. If only she could latch onto something perfect like the delicious man in the tight jeans and dusty tee-shirt. He didn't seem old enough to have a child in middle school, but stranger things had happened. Moreover, he probably was either married to one of those Teach for America wannabe teachers.

Yeah, her luck ran like that, from bad to horrid to atrocious.

With that cheery thought front and center between her dual drumming pangs, Harper walked down the brightly lit hallway and into the growing humidity inside the gym. As she cleared the small foyer and the artificial visual attack of the soda machines,

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Carlita's waving hands caught her attention. A fat grin, full of hollow professionalism, lingered around her mouth and her eyes were wide with something that looked a little like shock.

Harper increased her pace. Her ebony heels clicking against the wood floor seemed to send a Morse code signal to the butterflies in her stomach. She'd worked alongside Carlita for five years, and that expression of fear mixed with surprise meant something unplanned had occurred.

"Hurry up!" Carlita nearly screamed as she adjusted her skirt, yanking down the hem. She licked her lips, wetting the scarlet lipstick and met Harper's eyes. "You aren't going to believe this, but I just saw Scott Pearson's skinny butt running around the gym!"

"What?" Harper asked. "Here? He's here?"

"Well, this is a school," Mark replied, still seated in his chair, but sitting up. He leaned forward and had his elbows on each knee. His hands were clasped together in the V his opened legs made.

"Ha, ha," Harper replied before turning her attention to Carlita. "Why the fire alarm stare? He could be here for soccer practice."

Carlita's brunette curls shimmered as she shook her head. "All extracurriculars were canceled due to the conference, remember?"

"Right. That's right."

Mark squinted as he used his head to gesture to Scott Pearson's wiry body clad in jeans and a sweatshirt doing cartwheels between the two bleachers. "There goes the sixth grade's most-likely-to-do-time candidate."

"Shush," Carlita hissed. "Stop that Mark. His parents are here if he's here."

Harper nodded in numb agreement. If...no, no. Not if, *when* Scott's parents arrived at their table, she had to remain focused. *Best to have something to show them when they ask.* She hastily rummaged through the box of student portfolios. Horribly thin compared to most of the other students, Scott's portfolio highlighted the boy's complete lack of interest in school.

"Remember," Carlita said, scorn making her voice hard like a paddle, "two good comments for every negative one."

“Why do they make it so hard?” Mark asked dully.

Harper lightly socked him on the arm, and in her head she repeated the positive support standard: *two to one, two to one...*

Like the other two teachers, Harper’s eyes remained locked on the pale, sable-haired kid bouncing around the gym as if he owned it. Her stomach tightened when he stopped playing and glumly began walking toward their table. Someone had called his attention to the teachers, and now the boy strolled in a rapid manner to their table. Harper scanned the now crowded gym, but could not locate the parent who had lashed the class clown into line with a one-word rebuke.

“Evening, Scott,” Mark said, not getting up, not even meeting the boy’s eyes.

Harper sighed.

“Scott, you here for your report card, right?” she asked, hating the false ring of her voice. Students could pick up on the canned quality to her teacher voice, but most adults couldn’t. That was why administrators loved it and students hated it. “I need a parent to sign for it.”

Scott’s right shoulder rose and fell with all the apathy he could muster.

“You don’t want to see it?” Carlita asked, hands on her hips, face twisted in barely restrained dislike.

Scott moved his head slightly to look at her and his face mirrored her own. Math, by far, had been his worse subject according to his progress report.

“It sucks anyway,” Scott snapped. “Who gives a shit about a stupid piece of paper?”

Harper opened her mouth to rebuke the boy’s language, but a shadow fell over him.

“Apologize. Now, son!” commanded the voice attached to the shadow.

“Sorry,” the boy muttered a breath above the hum of the overhead fans.

Harper’s mouth dropped open and all the saliva in her throat seemed to evaporate. There, in all his hunky handsomeness, was the white tee-shirt and tight jeans model. He removed his ball cap, and she could see at last that his eyes were a faint grayish blue. Lips, a slash of pink fury, and dark stubble blanketing his

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lower face, he seemed ready for a cover shoot, not spending time amongst a group of tired teachers.

“Are you his teacher?” the man asked, eyes moving from one to the other. They stopped at Harper, lingering a bit longer than they had on the other two, but then again, that might have been her wishful thinking. “I’m Nathaniel Pearson, Scott’s father.”

Carlita shot her a fast scowl before answering, “I’m Ms. Rodriguez. I teach math.”

Both Carlita and Mark glanced at her, for she was next in line, but her lips gave a feeble attempt at forming words. Too bad her mouth and throat were too dry to speak.

“I’m Mr. Shoemaker,” Mark said with a nod.

Before she knew it, Mr. Pearson’s eyes were on her again. Their intensity made her fidget and she struggled to retain some composure. How was she supposed to tell this man his son was the menace of the entire sixth grade?

“And you are?” he asked, a soft smile now fluttering about his mouth. Did he have any idea how he unnerved her? If so, why the hell did he find it amusing?

This burst of anger unglued her lips and she said, “I’m Ms. Perry. I teach language arts.”

Each word Mr. Pearson spoke felt like a quick lick against Harper’s clit. Befuddled, Harper couldn’t figure it out. Mr. Pearson was simply too gorgeous to be a father and certainly too damn fine to be Scott Pearson’s father.

Chapter Two

It took Harper a minute to realize that everyone's eyes had locked onto her face. Through the thick silence's murk, she shot them a nervous grin, feeling it wiggle across her lips in an imitation of her internal struggle. Swallowing with the last bit of saliva her mouth could conjure, she met Mr. Pearson's stare and croaked out, "Well, here's Scott's report card."

Her fingers worked as if they had a mind of their own. She saw them raffle through the stack of carbon copies and pluck out the one labeled *Pearson, Scott* as if they belonged to someone else. Her eyes now on the blur of manufactured blue, she tried to cage the soaring butterflies in her belly. Sprinkled dots of sweat littered her forehead. With an anxious giggle that reminded her of always-in-love, twelve-year-old Sarah Miles in third core, Harper tucked a rogue curl behind her ear and handed the paper to Mr. Pearson.

In turn, amusement flashed across his face, making her heart thump faster. However, the tension tightened as he read the sheet, and Harper gasped like it had all been physical—tangible. It turned into a cough and she twisted away from him to hack the horniness from her esophagus. Mercifully, Carlita swooped in to save her from complete and utter embarrassment.

Thank you, girl. Gonna have to make that up to you.

"You'll notice, Mr. Pearson, Scott's grade in math," Carlita launched into an explanation to Mr. Pearson's unspoken questions—attempting to head off the car crash this meeting threatened to become. "I have a folder for him too."

She unearthed a manila folder labeled neatly with Scott's name in blue print capital letters as if shouting this child was dangerous.

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What the hell is the matter with me? Yes, he's as fine as any man I've met. True. Can't deny that. Come on body, stop acting like a horny teenager and perform your duties!

With her entire being blushing and hot from Mr. Pearson's burrowing gaze, Harper straightened and tuned into the conversation. She discovered a sulky Scott trying to explain to his father how the grades magically appeared on the report card.

"She gave me that stupid grade," Scott bellowed, drawing glances and scowls from spectators. "I turned in my work. She lost the shit and I'm paying for it."

Carlita's crimson stained mouth became a harsh line of irritation. "I don't give grades, Scott, you *earn* them."

Mr. Pearson's intense gaze now pinned Scott to the point the boy fidgeted. Apparently Mr. Pearson's intense stare unnerved everyone, though Harper knew hers was for a different reason. Scott shuffled from Nike-clad foot to Nike-clad foot, eyes studying the tree rings embedded in the flooring. Harper saw the glare and her heart pinched in pity for the boy.

"Scott, I have had about enough of your foul language. You *will* stop and you will stop now!" The voice spoke of the authority the way only a father could. Scott was well and truly chastised.

Never thought that would happen.

"Mr. Pearson," Harper began, drawing his eyes back to hers, and instantly her clit applauded with rapid pulses against her panties' cotton fabric. Already a slick thirst glazed her pus and she fought with amazing restraint the impulse to yank up her ebony skirt, glide her index finger to part her swollen lips and touch the button that controlled her rising fire. "Scott is also failing language arts. His report card is a call of alarm from our entire team. We have sent correspondence to his home address, left messages at the number given and sent our school social worker to said address."

When nervous, revert to professional teacher speak. Yes, Harper knew her nerves were shot through with a huge dose of lust.

Mr. Pearson nodded, but the lips hosting his smirk had crumbled into a frown. Scott fidgeted under his father's scowl.

"Yes, I'm sure you have."

“We’re interested in helping Scott achieve,” Harper added, with a smile that would flake off with too much scrutiny.

“Two to one,” Mark muttered from the corner of his mouth, a hint of amusement tickling Harper’s ears. Annoyance drained her attempts to remain professional.

Damn it. I need one more good thing to say about the boy. Actually, I’m in a deficit because Carlita gave one negative too.

She took in another deep breath and put both her palms on the table for stability, God help her. Leaning forward a bit, she summoned seven years of teaching experiences.

I can do this. He’s just a man. A man like any other...

Something from the rear of her mind, where all the naughty things were locked up tight, escaped and whispered in glee, *not like any man you’ve met.*

Mr. Pearson’s furious gaze strayed from the sulky look on his son’s face and returned to hers. Locked onto hers, the fury spilled out of his eyes like water from a damn. His lips cracked into a soft smile—one filled with something bordering on relief. His eyebrows relaxed and his hands, those massive, wide hands, came to rest on his chiseled hips, drawing Harper’s attention down to the waist and inspiring visions of locking her long, cocoa legs tight around them.

“He is not a stupid child,” Mr. Pearson said, voice rolling out of his mouth like an approaching storm. “My son is much smarter than *this*.” He shoved the clutched report card at her. “And he is much more capable than, than *this*.”

He shook the report card clutched in his fist at Carlita.

“No, no, he isn’t stupid,” Harper heard herself saying, though until that very moment she hadn’t given it any thought. Scott was the type of student you hoped would make it through each day without causing disasters big enough to warrant in-school suspension. She hadn’t focused at all on the boy’s potential, as he never tried to do anything in the way of academics. “I’m sure once we get the behavior under control, we can focus on his academics, uh, in both content areas.”

From the corner of her eye, she spied Carlita’s face scrunched down in a furious scowl. Her lips quivered at her—not at them. Harper pulled back and glanced at her co-worker. “Right, Ms. Rodriguez?”

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Carlita's angular face relaxed into the delicate make-up on her face and grinned—the faked, artificial one given to parents she disliked. Harper swallowed, but a rise of hot irritation stained the air between them. Already the storm clouds drifted across Mr. Pearson's face again, and something primal and protective shot up from someplace deep within Harper.

Stop it! You're not going to keep making him angry, Carlita. He needs to hear good things about his son too, not the gossip glob from other teachers.

Harper blew out a sigh instead of the cross words, and resurrected a grin of her own. Yet when Mr. Pearson swung his eyes back to hers, a shudder so severe ripped through Harper it left her breathless. Each taunt fiber of her bearing longed to erase the displeasure marring his face. Mr. Pearson's fierce gaze melted the frost of Carlita's waxy grin.

The man made her legs weak, and she gripped the table once more for stability. Goodness, she needed a long drink of icy cold water. No, something much stronger—wine, white and chilled.

"We should schedule a conference," Mark said, bursting through the thick thong of tension.

A small grouping of parents had pooled behind the fabulous Mr. Pearson. Murmurs filtered in from the cluster of concerned adults, and Mark gestured to those behind Mr. Pearson.

I bet they're all staring at his ass and wishing they could palm it. Just like me.

"So, if you could step over here..." Mark was saying to Mr. Pearson. The differences between the two men struck Harper as cosmic parody. Mr. Pearson, all chiseled and stone-hard body, ready to be dissolved beneath her sexual fervor. Mark, on the other hand, was all wiry and lanky, to which her thighs would snap into pieces.

Mr. Pearson's eyes never left her face as he guided his son over to the side of the clothed table. He seemed caught between his anger at Scott and giving her his attention.

Scott remained silent, not meeting anyone's eyes. He'd shut himself off. Mr. Pearson didn't actually touch Scott, and Scott's folded arms, pout and tight lip of discontent quivering in angst gave non-verbal cues to leave him alone.

“What day and time works best?” Harper asked and instantly flushed.

It sounds like I’m asking him out.

“Uh, for the conference,” she added with a nervous smile. “I’m free Monday.”

That smirk again appeared on his face followed by a quick flush as if he had got himself doing something naughty. “Are you?”

Mark coughed and said dryly, “We are all available Monday, Mr. Pearson. That’s our designated conference day. From 9:30 to 10:50 we’re available to meet.”

Thankful for her caramel-toned skin, Harper straightened her pencil skirt. Seeing Mr. Pearson again in the confines of her classroom—seated snugly behind a student desk—conjured a new round of tightening in her stomach and a gush of wetness in her panties. *Yes, this pair of panties is fodder for the trash.*

“Yes, we,” she said, a giggle escaping her mouth yet again. She didn’t sound like herself at all and the fluttering nervousness didn’t sit well with her. Steeling herself to steady her shrill tone, and grabbing the last bit of professionalism in her grasp, she added, “Would that work for you?”

Mr. Pearson leaned in close to her, closing the distance between them and invading her personnel space in a way that suggested he knew it unnerved her. To her surprise, she didn’t move away from him, but held her ground. She even dared to inch closer to him, compelled by her attraction to him. This close she saw his lips, and they curved as she stared at them.

How would they taste? Salty? Dusty? Sweet like gum or fresh like peppermint? Would you whimper if I bit that lip? Suck it? Would you whisper my name and demand for more, Mr. Pearson?

“Yes,” he said. “I will be there. Nine-thirty?”

“Uh huh,” she replied, unable to form words as the cornflower of his eyes threatened to drown her in their heat, in their deep puddles of stirring arousal.

“Excellent,” Mark said, louder than necessary, and the intense knot around Harper and Mr. Pearson shattered. Mark returned her flash of annoyance with a wide grin.

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Bastard knows what he's doing. Wait until that mom with the extra, super-sized boobs shows up. I'm going to rattle his cage—turnabout is fair play, Mark!

"See you then," Harper managed around the thick lump in her throat. "Monday."

Mr. Pearson glanced at Mark and then said coolly, "I want to have answers about Scott, too. I'm willing to do what's necessary to help my son."

Carlita nodded in their direction, but couldn't reply. A set of parents battled her with questions about the advanced math program. Harper had known her long enough to know Carlita hadn't missed a thing.

"Ms. Perry," called that voice which wound every point of her body to tight tips of hardness. Her nipples pressed impatiently against the fabric of her silk bra and no doubt on through the cream blouse.

"Yes?" she asked, breathless as her eyes once more locked onto his. She felt as if Mr. Pearson had pressed that marble-marvelous body against hers—such strained passion. And it was only his damn voice!

"I look forward to Monday," he said, eyes burning through her professional demeanor.

"As do I," she breathed, not liking the effect he had on her. He eroded her professionalism as easily as if peeling an orange.

He smiled at her as he turned to go. "Come on, Scott. P.E. is next."

"Good evening, Mr. Pearson," she said, drawing her teacher voice out to the fullest.

Mr. Pearson stopped and shot over his shoulder, "Call me, Nathaniel."

All around her, life skewed to nothing but the annoying humming of words, polite noises and swishes of papers. For Harper had transcended the madness, exalted to cloud nine, courtesy of Nathaniel Pearson.

Chapter Three

Nathaniel's hands clutched the steering wheel in a death grip meant to break the object into two equal halves. Had it been a living, breathing organism, it would be in danger of dying. The protective rubber squeezed between his fingers and his thick digits ached from the tight hold they had on the circular instrument. He glanced into the rearview mirror, angling it downward so he could capture Scott's reflection. Again a pressure surged in his chest and his throat, compressing his diaphragm under the emotional pressure of seeing his son so much older than when he'd glimpsed him last. Counting to twenty, Nathaniel peered at the boy with his shade of blue eyes and sandy hair color.

"Scott..."

"No, Dad," the creature that once was his adorable son said. "Don't. Not. Now."

The teenager's whine grated against his nerves. His muscles flexed in defense to the annoying sound. In quick succession, Nathaniel counted to thirty. Twenty just didn't cut it anymore.

With a deep sigh, he dug deep within him and found the patience his father used for him. As Scott's father, this attitude and rebelliousness had been his responsibility to handle. Then he had to *handle* it.

So, sucking down his own rising anger, Nathaniel said in a forced calm, "Yes, now. Your report card demands we address it right this minute. What the hell are you doing? This, this isn't you. I know sixth grade is a strange beast compared to elementary school, but..."

Nathaniel faltered, a bit overwhelmed by the tide of questions sweeping over him. He had anticipated some errant behavior; after all, this was his son. Still, this report card showed a great deal of drama and angst. The questions made him release

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his locked hold on the steering wheel. Scott needed to explain his actions, or lack thereof, to clear the thick fog of confusion clouding Nathaniel's understanding.

"I don't get it. You're so much more than this, Scott."

"Why? Because I'm your son?" Scott snarled. "Ooo, a construction worker's son. Brilliant."

"Yes," Nathaniel said, a bit shocked at the deep thread of anger in those questions and the venom. "I took off early from work today to get down here to see how you were doing. I know you're smart and talented, especially in math, so what gives?"

The frustrated father threw the truck into reverse and backed out of one of the school's parking spots. His face burned with irritation. Despite the cool fall air and crisp night, he perspired with each mile closer he came to Tara's house. Scott's mother, Tara had shoved the steel wall between him and Scott, and he allowed her to do it. Tara the tramp, the tyrant, and the tormentor. It still escaped his comprehension how a love like the one they once shared had melted into rabid hate.

Yeah, that worked. All the crap about love, marriage, and family—the American ideal of happiness was a bunch of hooey. Right now, I don't feel the least bit happy, nor did I when harassed by that nag.

"I'm waiting, son," he replied at last to the boy in the backseat. Pulling his head above the choppy seas of regret and hate, Nathaniel forced down the bitterness in his mouth. "I want to help."

"Help?" Scott's cold and flat word smacked hard against Nathaniel's ears. "Now you want to help. You ain't been around for what? Six years?"

In the harsh silence that followed, Nathaniel's heart hung low. Yes, Scott's cold indifference hinted that he was icing over some secret pain he didn't want to talk about or discuss. The bond father and son shared had been shattered by time, distance, and an angry ex-wife.

I wondered when you would get around to that.

"I'm...I've been gone, yes. Not by choice, son, for real. The job—"

"Yeah. Sure. The job. No wonder mom left you. You're married to it."

Nathaniel's mouth opened and shut by sheer force of will.

After several attempts to control his guilt and anger, he managed to croak out, "I'm not married to it. But it keeps both you and your mother fed, clothed, and housed. Right? So don't be rude or disrespectful of the job."

Angry silence filled the truck.

This isn't helping, both of us mad. I'm the adult. I can't let my own son goad me into an argument.

"So, tell me. What's going on at school?" he spat each word out to keep from shouting. Each one separate and distinct pelted against the truck's cab. "I have yet to get an answer on that one."

"Nuthin'."

"That's obvious," Nathaniel retorted. He caught himself, took a deep breath, and tried again. "There are those who care about you, Scott, at the school."

Trying to connect to the rage-filled hormones that resembled his son, Nathaniel made himself wait and listen. Sure he had been labeled as father, but he didn't know anything.

"Yeah. Right. Ms. Perry hates me," Scott scoffed bitterly. He folded arms tightened. "Same way with Ms. Rodriguez. All of them suck."

Nathaniel's ears pricked up at *her* name, Perry. He smiled, but held fast to the hard tone for his son. Damn. He remembered when English teachers were crumpled up, gray haired spinsters. Not the full-bodied babe who taught his son. Her butterscotch eyes flashed in his mind's eye. Nestled in them was integrity and intellect uncommon amongst the teachers he'd met.

Not at all like the math teacher, whose cruel eyes held hints of bitterness. Scott probably had little to do with that disgust marring the teacher's face. That bitch was just mean. *And she shouldn't be around kids. She takes pleasure in deconstructing kids' self esteem.* He could just tell that about her.

Ms. Perry carried herself in an entirely different manner. She breathed sensuality, but not so a student would notice. No, she reined it in, but it flowed about her, an intoxicating aura.

"I doubt she is out to get you, either of them really. She's concerned." He spied Scott's apathetic shrug. The anger bowled over his control again, through him, and he couldn't keep the frustration from seething from him.

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“God, she doesn’t care about me,” Scott growled pounding the seat with a series of quick punches. “She’s all into *you*.”

Nathaniel nearly slammed his truck into the minivan at the red light in front of him. *Shit!* “What?” he barked, twisting around to his son. *How had he picked up on that? Was he watching me the entire time?*

“Like you couldn’t tell. She was all ga-ga gross over you.”

“Umm, okay.” Nathan shifted uncomfortably in his seat as he searched for a deflection. “Well, that’s not the point.”

Scott snickered, earning a stern look.

“Stop changing the subject, son,” Nathaniel said, still hanging on to this authority tone. “Your grades and behavior need to improve.” He was rewarded with a shrug and a sulk.

Nathaniel caught the next traffic light and blew out a frustrated puff. Women often saw him as a hunky construction worker, a stereotype, but once they knew of his past, they bolted. The calls ceased. The text messaging ended. His desire had made thinking about the sexy teacher very difficult. Celibacy did that to people.

Distracted for a moment, he grinned into the empty night as it unfolded before him. Nearly vacant streets allowed him to drift between lanes without accident. His mind wandered as restlessly as his driving. Yeah, he’d felt the forceful pull between them the moment their eyes connected.

More importantly, he had to focus on Scott’s behavioral issues. “What happened, Scott?” he insisted. “I heard their points of view, but I need to hear from you.”

“Nuthin’.”

When Scott had been younger, his son loved him and they were buddies. Tight. Two of a kind, but now, as Nathaniel looked back at his seething angry teenager, he pondered who the hell it was in the backseat. Surely it wasn’t his son.

How could this chasm between them exist after a mere six years? How had he allowed Tara to dig it and fill it with hate and bitterness? Nathaniel sighed. The better question he had to ask himself was how to bridge it and get his son back.

“Scott, I’m not the enemy,” he said, trying to sound calm. “You’re in middle school and soon, well, soon, you’ll be a man.”

More stormy silence from the shadow-filled backseat.

"I will help you. If you need tutors, I will get them. But I need your help. I need you to want it too."

He slowed down as he reached Tara's house, and counted the moments until he could head on home and to the shower.

Had I said too much? Talked for too long?

"I'm still your dad. I care about you. You might not believe that, but I do."

Nathaniel shifted the truck into park right out front of Tara's house, if you could call it that. The dilapidated building leaned to one side as if it had limped to this lot and couldn't move any further. With a yard teeming with weeds, waste, and God knew what else, he couldn't imagine his son hanging out here or playing here.

Some of the people he had met in prison came from this area. Nathaniel would continue to watch Scott until the front door slammed closed, but he'd since stopped going inside or even into the drive, he and Tara gave polite waves, nothing more. Interacting with Tara had to be from a distance, like wrestling with a snake: you had to keep it as far from your person as possible.

The backdoor unlocked with a *cluh*.

"You gonna pick me up next weekend?" Scott asked, squeaking a bit on the final word.

There it was again. Fear. His son felt abandoned by him, and Nathaniel understood it would take time to reestablish that trust between them.

Scott collected his backpack, avoiding meeting his father's probing gaze.

"I wouldn't miss spending time with you," Nathaniel said, twisting further around to see Scott's face. "I've lost too much time already."

"Don't be late," he said, soft against the noise spilling in from the opened door.

Through the thick wall Scott had built in the years since Nathaniel left for Texas came a speck of illumination. Nathaniel smiled. Once Scott had shot him back a brief wave before vanishing inside his house, Nathaniel liked how he'd let the report card business go for now. He shifted into drive, and pulled out into the street, made a right onto Pembroke, and grinned.

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The boy had reached middle school without his guiding efforts and that didn't sit well with Nathaniel. Not at all. He had a lot to catch up on and even more to impart to his son.

Now if he could only get that sizzling teacher to do the same—let him in.

Chapter Four

Friday afternoon, Milkweed Spa and Tan

“Do you think guys with long dreadlocks are vain?” Carlita asked, face painted in a caviar and pearl lifting cream mask the color of gray. “They always seem to think they’re the stuff of legends, swinging those damn snakes like an Appalachian preacher.” Her lips remained uncovered and they moved as if on their own accord. Eerie, but then Harper was used to Carlita being a bit strange.

“What?” Harper asked dreamily from a lounge where a heat body wrap sapped away her stress. Slathered in red seaweed and Arizona soil vitamins, the mixture hardened across her naked body, and seemed to drain away the miserable residue the teacher-student conference left on her spirit. The day after the conference, Thursday, dragged by as if she was carrying a corpse—smelly, heavy and disgusting—on her back. Friday found her here at a spa with Carlita. They’d won free passes from a local radio contest weeks ago, but Harper had wanted to save them for an after-conference rejuvenation. Well, Harper had won, and Carlita satisfied the “guest” part of the “you and a guest” on the contest certificate.

It was only when Carlita said, “You could’ve just gone twice” that Harper realized the error of asking Carlita to go along with her. Chained to each other by some cosmic force, Harper and Carlita had indulged in the spa’s many treats. If Harper wanted a Swedish massage, so did Carlita. If Harper wanted to be dipped in chocolate, Carlita did also. The entire what-you-can-do-I-can-do-better routine gyrated on her nerves. Harper had to admit, listening to the other woman prattle and complain had

reached its limit. Her mind automatically switched to internal dialogue.

“Yeah, like any of those damn Lenny Kravitz wannabes could be as sexy as he is,” Carlita said indignantly. With cucumbers on her eyes, and reclined in a comfortable recliner, she resembled a queen of some freakish science fiction planet. “It’s gross.”

Harper sniggered. Leave it to Carlita to discuss dreadlocks, something she knew very little about, and to most would sound offensive as all get out. Instead of arguing or bitch-smacking Carlita, Harper simply sighed and closed her eyes, tuning out her friend’s driveling about the homeless.

The wrap smeared across her body failed to stem the throbbing of her clit at the sheer memory of how masculine Nathaniel smelled. Handsome stubble across his chin and jaw line had only cemented the persona of a rugged, all man into her mind. With that tight tee-shirt skimming across that delicious torso, Nathaniel had caused two days of sleepless, lonely, and dildo-filled nights. Yet strangely, her session of self-loving left her feeling even hungrier for male contact and Harper knew which one she wanted.

As so often happened in the last two days, Harper’s overly horny brain supplied the mental candy—Nathaniel Pearson. His tanned limbs flowing from the tight-fitting shirt spoke of constant reps not artificially created. The buzzed blonde hair, sharp cerulean eyes that sparkled in their intensity, and the ripped torso and arms of someone who did physical labor for a living, not for recreation, had wet her vaginal lips almost instantly. Darn it! She wanted to masturbate again!

And all because Scott’s father was hotter than a grill on the Fourth of July.

“You’re quiet.” Carlita’s spiky tone poked through the fantasy Nathaniel with razor-sharp precision. “Construction worker got your tongue?”

“No, uh, I—I’m relaxing. Finding my inner peace and embracing.”

“Thinking about embracing some Nathaniel Pearson?” Carlita inquired greasily. “Damn, he was super fine.”

“Didn’t notice,” Harper replied, not liking the fact Carlita had spied him as handsome too. Not that every single woman in the gym hadn’t taken notice of him when he walked in. People noticed the difference between night and day too. And Nathaniel shone with a coarse gleam, a diamond in the rough. Only those too elderly, blind, or male didn’t take note of the sexy, single father.

What am I getting all huffy for? He doesn’t belong to me. Probably doesn’t even remember my name. The naked truth is I’m emotionally bankrupt. I can’t give anymore to anyone. Let alone have the energy to pursue a single father who doesn’t even know I exist outside of a classroom.

But why had Carlita connected him to her? Really. Out of the millions of things Harper could be thinking about, why did Carlita zero in on Nathaniel?

“Wonder why Scott’s such a menace,” Carlita was saying in the drone of someone still furious.

“Dunno.”

As if the hint finally sank in, Carlita stopped talking to Harper. She sighed noisily and began to hum a tune, something fast and every so often a few Spanish words slipped by the humming.

Harper opened her eyes and watched Carlita for a moment. With her nose twisted up and her lips pressed into a fuchsia line of irritation, Harper figured the woman’s temper would render the mask’s efforts useless. Both single, Harper wondered if Nathaniel had sized up Carlita the other night as a possible candidate. Not that it mattered. If her friend wanted to snare him, she would. Carlita devoured men the way fat people ate hamburgers—with glee, gluttony, and little guilt. Harper shuddered. She didn’t want to see her Nathaniel in Carlita’s clutches, but if the humming and mentions were hints, she knew that Carlita would try to tame his heart, if for no other purpose than to say she had.

Not that teachers became involved romantically with parents all the time. Harper had never heard of a teacher dating a student’s parent, though it surely occurred. People were people and love connected them at the most inopportune times. *After all, teaching is a profession, not my entire existence.* She rolled her

eyes at the ridiculousness of her train of thoughts. Sure, Nathaniel was a sculptured god, a romance novel hunk, yes, but his well-muscled torso contained a heart in there as well. To whom did it belong, and why did Harper care?

Men like Nathaniel Pearson didn't date over-the-age-of-thirty teachers. Not when there were younger, fresh-out-of-college teachers with slim waists and perky breasts teaching right next door to the dumpy ones. Besides, teachers had to contend with the myth that they were teachers *all the time*—even at home, at Wal-mart and at the swimming pool. She could thank those stupid teacher movies for that widespread belief.

Still, part of her wanted to have that body in all its hard and soft patterns pressed skin to skin against hers. Harper sighed and closed her eyes again. Instantly, Nathaniel stood before her as he did two nights ago in the stuffy gym, his face a smear of concern and a tiny bit of shock.

"He still coming on Monday to the parent meeting?" Carlita asked, her husk of a voice scraping against Harper's nerves. "Did you do a reminder call today before we left?"

Harper forced her longing to walk out to the adjoining room. Instead she said, "Yes, why would he cancel?"

"Talk to him?"

"No," Harper said, icier than she intended, but she'd grown damn tired of Carlita's questions. "Why?"

"I was wondering if you spoke to him and if he's asked you out yet," Carlita explained with a casual shrug. "See if that fire you two set off Wednesday had erupted into a blaze."

Harper's mouth dropped. Good thing she wasn't wearing the mask on her face; she'd crack it into fractures. She hastily closed it when she saw Carlita removing the cucumber slices from her eyes. She blinked a few times then peered at Harper.

"What fire?" Harper said, tossing in a snort as if she found the whole thing humorous.

"That man lit a fire inside you, so much so you were fumbling all over yourself," Carlita teased. "Afterward your ass was glowing like a candle in a blackout. I couldn't pry that damn smile off your face."

Harper blushed. Had she really been that transparent? And if she was that easily read by Carlita, what did Nathaniel think? *I*

know what he thinks. He's thinking I'm a desperate woman who has to recruit possible lovers from school functions. And he wouldn't be off base about a lot of that.

"So, on Monday, you going to be able to put that flame out?" Carlita asked, her voice falling quiet as the attendant came into remove the mask.

Harper took in a deep breath and let it out slowly. The truth of the matter lay in the situation. No way Nathaniel, the naughty hunk, had any interest in a tired, overworked, underpaid, unattached woman. Besides, she taught his son. All kinds of ethical and moral issues swarmed about that one. No, she had to stay clear and far from Mr. Pearson, because of two reasons. One, she didn't want to make a complete ass of herself again, and two, she didn't want to be fired.

So, steadying herself and adding courage to the lie she was about to tell, she said, "I have no idea what you're talking about."

"Sure you don't," Carlita mumbled through the massaging hands of the attendant.

After removing the mask, the petite girl applied another layer after layer of different creams and chemicals into Carlita's skin with all the care and attention a person paid to a vagrant. Harper watched in amusement, because with each rough pull, tug and pat, Carlita couldn't speak. The coarse handling hadn't gone unnoticed by Carlita either.

"Your time is up. Ready to wash down, Ms. Perry," said a second attendant who seemed to appear behind her out of nowhere.

Awkwardly, Harper got to her feet and followed the attendant out through a small door and around to the bath area. As she entered the sunken bath the girl gestured to, Harper mused over Carlita's words. Did she actually think Nathaniel had any interest in her? Fire. That wasn't a fire; that was the dried wood of her loins cracking in despair.

Harper laughed—a bitter one, which launched from her throat in a hard cough.

She managed to scrub off all of the body wrap, and amazingly she felt lighter and slimmer. Harper entered the dressing room dressed in a robe of thick terrycloth. Ready

herself to go home too, Carlita leaned against one of the vanities, applying her lipstick in a careful circle. Fully dressed in her jeans and a pink blouse, she looked younger. Maybe the mask had worked.

Harper shrugged with a small grin and threw her slimmer make-up case onto the neighboring vanity. She held her thoughts to herself, because the last thing she wanted was another discussion about Nathaniel Pearson. If it got out that she had a hankering for a hunk of Nate, the principal would be furious. A parent and a teacher sitting in a tree, k-i-s-s-i-n-g. Impossible. Those were two rival factions that should never make nice, especially as a couple or unit.

"I heard from Mark today," Carlita said, not glancing over at Harper, but staring straight ahead into the mirror, the gold tone lipstick tube making its rounds over and over her mouth. "He came by during prep but you were in another meeting. He said something about the mother coming to the meeting Monday."

Harper's chest erupted in nervous panic. The mother. Carlita didn't even have to say who, or what student. The fear racing up her spine meant only one—Tara Pearson.

"Oh," was all Harper could manage around the pressure on her chest.

Carlita put down the lipstick tube and took out a mascara tube from an enormous suitcase stuffed with makeup. "I know how you feel, but social services said she can't be barred from coming. And to add to that, she's bringing an advocate."

"What?" Harper gasped. Hauling an advocate to a parent teacher meeting was like killing a fly with a tank.

"Mother claims—at least she told the social worker yesterday—that we have failed to meet Scott's needs, so he should be 'entitled,' her word not mine, to be able to make-up all, and I mean, *all* the missing assignments. Every core class he failed."

Harper stood rooted to the spot. Too stunned to utter much of anything, let alone think.

Carlita sighed and shrugged. "That hardly matters now." The mascara brush in her hand drooped. "I mean, we are a team and grades have already gone out and..."

Harper nodded solemnly—as if with great thought. Adrenaline rolled the fear backward. “Yeah, but we need something more to give her than a ‘we tried.’”

“More?” Carlita scoffed, cutting her eyes over to Harper. The entire brush had been discarded, forgotten against the vanity’s glass surface. “I’ve given and given to that child, but all he does is push it away like it’s rotten meat, or a plate of shit.”

At this, Harper shrugged. “I guess I’ll try to prepare for it,” Harper said softly. Maybe if she said it in a kind, gentle manner the threat wouldn’t be so great. Carlita knew how to ruin a good feeling, but she supposed the sooner she knew about it, the better. “I’ll show his portfolio and benchmark score from first quarter, but it is really early to start pointing fingers and touting in an advocate.”

Carlita shot Harper with another one-shoulder shrug. Her thin bones shifted her indifference to the floor where it slithered over to Harper.

“Fine, but I’m bringing my own ammunition,” Carlita snapped. “And that skank-ass mother of his best watch out. I’m not going to do extra work because of her lazy-ass son and piss-poor parenting skills.”

Harper waited as Carlita shoved her lipstick and mascara tubes back into the bag, tossed her head up high and stomped from the spa’s dressing room. Scott didn’t accept help because he didn’t want it. Right. There had to be more to it than that. The boy was hurting and lashing out with regularity. True, the turn the meeting took threw them both off guard, but being angry about it didn’t hold any hope of getting through it without a meltdown.

This isn’t going to go over well. And worst of all, it’ll be Scott who suffers the most.

With that thought locked in the forefront of her mind, Harper picked up her make-up bag, tossed it in her teacher satchel, and headed out the side door. Thankfully, she and Carlita had taken separate cars. Mark had pushed Nathaniel into a parent meeting and now the entire thing was boiling.

And she didn’t want to be burned.

She had enough scars, emotional and physical, to last the rest of her natural life.

Chapter Five

Friday afternoon, Nathaniel Pearson's apartment

Home at last, Nathaniel dropped his dust-covered toolbox and sat down his blue lunch cooler. In a huge gritty cloud, he removed his heavy, steel-toed boots just inside the front door, where the tan linoleum stretched out in an arc before the carpet began. He locked the door, released a breath and listened.

Nothing moved, squeaked, or coughed.

"Honey, I'm home," he yelled out, noting the bit of humor flitting around those words. No honey for him, not for a long time now.

Long since accustomed to the quiet, Nathaniel headed in his socked feet down the short hallway that fed into the living room. Yanking his tee-shirt off, he made a beeline right for the kitchen. With a flick of his finger, the tiny three-sided room appeared in a bath of warm light. There, he stripped off the rest of his work clothes above the little red kitchen rug. The laundry closet remained hidden behind two French doors.

He opened them and lifted the washer's lid. Dropping in his work clothes, he noted the other clothes piled inside. Each day his ritual commenced once he stepped inside his door. Step one, leave the work items at the door; then add his filthy clothes to the ones from the previous day in the washer, until he had enough to do a load. Being Friday, he had a full workweek's worth and he started the wash. Adding detergent, softener and water, Nathaniel set the washer to run and closed the lid. Soon his articles of clothing could join their partners in the holding cell.

"Funny that—a cell. As if I ain't seen enough of those," he said, walking around in his boxer-briefs and socked feet. "I've got to work on my damn humor."

Like everything else in his life, prison seemed to have soured his humor as well.

He moved further into the kitchen, leaning against the granite-speckled surface of his counter until he stood perpendicular to the sinks. Arms crossed over his torso, he pondered the rocking of the washer. He stared at the gleaming white appliance and suddenly Ms. Perry popped onto its lid. Dressed seductively in a scarlet lace teddy, her coffee toned, full thighs flowing down to tapered ankles in matching stilettos. She uncrossed those delicious thighs, and turned over, getting to her knees on top of the appliance. She hoisted herself to a standing position, and with hands roaming over all those full and voluminous parts of her body, she began to dance, slow, with lots of rotating and gyrating.

Fuck.

His cock thickened and his hand drifted down to his rapidly growing phallus. In seconds his hand had pushed past the boxer-brief's elastic and firmly wrapped around his engorged member. He groaned and rubbed the expanse from balls to tip and back again as the vision continued her seductive tease.

God, she's hot!

The ability to see his fantasy with his eyes wide open occurred as a result of being locked up. He could ill afford to masturbate with his eyes closed while incarcerated, so he honed his horniness into waking visions, such as the one unfolding before him in his very own kitchen.

She smiled the same sweet grin she gave him at the conference, and glanced back over shoulder as she masterfully danced on top of the shuddering washing machine—as if it too found her so damn sexy it could hardly concentrate on its task.

Cock in his fist, he pumped in a lazy manner, gliding over the purpling satin head, and down the deeply veined shaft, for Nathaniel knew his overworked mind conjured the vision before him, just as it had in his dreams the last two nights. He blinked several times.

Yeah, I'm losing it.

He caved in to the waking fantasy, and his hand became hers. Ms. Perry no longer stood astride the appliance, but had magically appeared on her knees in front of him. He looked

down and she gazed up at him, carting the same smile. Quietly, she took his stiff staff in hand and opened her luscious mouth and slowly licked his purple head of his cock.

“Sweet Jesus,” Nathaniel said to the stale kitchen air, hissing as his hand pumped up. Down. Up. Down. Faster. Faster. Faster!

His apparition’s brunette strands brushed his balls, teasing and taunting him as she glided up and down his member. Those full lips served as pillows playing into the sensations rushing through him and burrowing into him and awakening things he’d left alone, locked down when he was locked up.

The orgasm spilled out of him as the beautiful woman at his feet rippled and vanished.

He spied the disillusion of his fantasy through slits in his eyes and as the aftershock of reaching his pinnacle pumped through him, making him pant and growl in pleasure.

“Damn.”

He snagged the freshly laundered dishtowel and wiped himself. Smirking as he turned to the fridge and squatted down to search about for something to eat. Not very hungry—at least not for food—he allowed the cool air to rush over his hot, damp body, but nothing stirred his interest. He closed it, and stood up.

I’m restless now, and more than a little bothered. The woman’s a teacher, and my son’s teacher at that. I can’t get involved with her. I mean, as if she would have me. Still, my body’s craving her like it does food. I can’t even eat thinking about her—again.

He left the kitchen, attempting to leave the lingering scent of his orgasm and its memory behind. The sparsely decorated living room contained a mauve loveseat, deep mahogany coffee table and end tables, and a leather recliner. Small, only 700 square feet, his one-bedroom apartment had been his sanctuary, his place of peace. After sharing a box with a variety of others for six years, this apartment felt like a castle. The solitude had cushioned his nightmares, his demons, and held steady him since his release. The halfway house had only served as an extension of his jail time.

Ms. Perry. Monday would come quickly, the weekend zipping by the way they always do. Then come Monday, he’d be

faced with the vixen vibrating her luscious body through to his, making his cock stiffen and his lusts spill over the container in which he'd kept them. Sure, he'd met beautiful women before, and after his stint in the slammer they seemed a plenty, but Ms. Perry plucked something loose inside of him—something he'd kept locked down tight and heavily guarded by sarcasm, indifference, and a tough hide of fast fury. His fists pounded back any physical threat, but the ones to his heart had been harder to avoid. Tara tore through him with damage that lingered in gaping wounds and leaked out his hope and faith in people. She left only his disillusionment to fester.

But Ms. Perry had wiggled her ample bottom into the spot he'd long since kept female hands away from. How? He didn't know. He'd only spoken to her for what? Fifteen minutes? But he couldn't deny the full force tug of her allure. She snagged his attention in a matter of minutes, with those beaming white teeth, kind eyes and curvy body. His thoughts centered on the dual problem of his ache for Ms. Perry and the trouble with his son.

"Yeah, I want her. What man wouldn't want to be buried deep inside those creamy caramel thighs?" he confessed to the empty room. Even though no one heard it, relief washed over him having spoken his sensual appetite aloud. Sure, he wanted her, but that didn't mean he *should*. He ran a hand across his buzzed strands and sighed, feeling his member start to pulse. Already the flush spread throughout his flesh, making him hot. What would she want with a convict? A construction worker at his uncle's business, to which he owned 40% shares, Nathaniel wasn't one for the boardroom. He acted as the foreman, a position he preferred, but he took the job a step further and got his hands dirty too. He could've come right out of prison and directly to the vice president spot, but he passed, electing to act as a foreman. He liked the tough work.

To make a play for the teacher or not?

As usual when he arrived at home, he headed down the hallway to his bathroom on the right, across from his bedroom. He pushed back the shower curtain, leaned into the shower, and turned on the water flow. Climbing into the tub, he felt the water for temperature before slipping into the warm streams. He put

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his head into the spray. The rush of debris, dust, and demolition fragments fell away under the water's spray.

Since being released after serving 80% of his time and fulfilling his parole obligations, Nathaniel couldn't ever truly see it as a *release*. His record acted like a shadow, always there, but hidden until illuminated. Like a blinking billboard, it would announce his one major screw up to the world. He longed for one bright spot in his life.

One.

And it seemed he'd found it right when he hadn't expected to ever discover it.

Ms. Perry. Would you love being in the shower with me right now? Touching me, allowing me to kiss those swollen orbs and soliciting little sounds from you? Do you like it from the front or the back? Would you want me buried inside you from behind or the side? Would you call my name or simply beg me to fuck you harder, baby? Whatever you want, Ms. Perry, I'd do...

When he first started his prison sentence, he thought nothing would quiet the rumblings of regret in the many hours of midnight his life had become at that point. Once released, the heavy drape of despair became a constant. Yet, his hope found only a void, clammy and vacant where hope once thrived and flourished within him. Now there was only nothing.

He'd felt steady. No. Not steady in her presence. Hopeful. Yes. That was it. Although the revelation of Scott's behavior had blindsided him and pushed him down into a long, dark tunnel of guilt and frustration, talking to Ms. Perry helped.

He shifted his head, having successfully shampooed it and rinsed the suds until the water ran clear. Picking up the soap from the dish, he lathered the grit and grime of manual labor.

If only it was as easy to erase my criminal past.

Ms. Perry popped into his mind, sending a beam of light directly into that dark thought. She was a beacon in a maelstrom.

Automatically his hand brushed his swollen shaft before closing over it once more. God, to lay his hands on the real woman, feeling that supple flesh beneath his hands, pressing his lips against those full round globes, taking those dark nipples into his mouth would be heaven. He would love to push his cock

into her promising warmth. The idea made his body tinge in need.

Up. Down. Up. Down.

Pleasure plowed through pride, through his guilt and fatigue.

Her. Ms. Perry. What will you teach me?

His hand became her soft, tawny one and Nathaniel pushed back against the wet, cold shower tiles, and increased the rhythm. Up. Down. Up. Down. His balls tightened. The image of her sexy mouth pressed over his shaft, sucking, licking his lonely tool, forced his climax and his cock jerked and sputtered, the water cleaning his juices as he erupted, the shower's thunderous noise, drowning his grunts and heavy pants.

"Damn," he groaned, doubled over from the wham of his orgasm.

I want her. Fuck, I need her!

Later dried and dressed in shorts, Nathaniel crawled into bed, flicked off the bedside light, and uttered his first prayer in fifteen years.

"Lord, keep me where the light is. Keep me where *she* is."

Chapter Six

Monday, James Tennison Middle School

Nathaniel pushed the budding fury downward far into the darkest part of his mind. Less than five feet from him sat Tara in all her bleached blonde glory. Air brushed nails painted a bright fuchsia that coordinated with her lipstick shade, her spaghetti strapped shirt and artfully painted smattered jeans. She wore flip-flops, which she bounced in complete boredom. Beside her hovered that schmuck of an advocate she used in her divorce proceedings, John Flynn. The six of them had been at it for over an hour. Discussing the best route for Scott, his behavior issues and his academic troubles failed to produce a clear-cut path. Though Nathaniel had said little, he understood one thing with certainty: they weren't getting anywhere fast. The lot of them fidgeted and sighed.

Ms. Rodriguez occupied the chair beside Tara, and beside her sat Mr. Shoemaker, the special education teacher. Scott didn't qualify for special education, but Mr. Shoemaker had daily contact with him. On the other side of Mr. Shoemaker, Nathaniel kept his arms crossed and his eyes straight ahead. The knot of frustration in his chest lessened when his eyes met the soothing calm chocolate ones across from him.

Now, he glimpsed over again to Harper. She made a point this morning to make him call her by her first name, Harper. She said only the students called her Ms. Perry. And he damn sure wasn't a student—not with the thoughts running rampant through his mind about her. She struck an image of professional chic, but Nathaniel liked how she didn't downplay her figure like some women with a little meat on their bones did.

He allowed himself to drink in the striking picture she posed, seated across from him. He couldn't help it. The creamy

silk blouse wrapped around her upper torso and hugged every curve like he'd love to do. It contrasted nicely with her rich dark skin, setting those earth hues on display. A navy skirt came to just below her knees and it skimmed those ample hips and thighs. Her amazingly flawless calves reached down into a pair of matching navy pumps, or whatever those damn things were called. The heel wasn't high, but rather square and chunky. As his eyes traveled back up her fantastic body, they stopped at her throat, where a single heart-shaped diamond pendant swung from a thin gold chain. Classy. Harper presented a classy woman, and damn if he didn't want to strip those clothes off and devour the woman beneath, make that classy vanish into a screaming, pleading, and panting passion-filled woman.

She met his eyes, shot him a small smile, and tucked her hair behind her ear. They'd done that a lot over the last hour. He'd glance over at her and discover her watching him. Once their eyes met, it seemed he would get shocked by a brief energy burst. It sizzled across his skin. As if she'd felt it too, Harper would break the connection and her deliciously darker skin nearly hid the flush of her skin. Was she shy, or was she trying to keep it professional between them? Paying attention to the discussion had grown increasingly difficult with the electric zings between him and Harper. Yeah, she didn't have to say it aloud. He could tell.

The chemistry that boomed between them at the conference had thickened and grew to something almost tangible. He wanted to shove all the binders, papers, and pens to the ground, snatch Harper up and dive into her heated cove right there on the table. To hell with everyone in the room—except Scott.

Scott.

A giggle captured his attention, and he dragged his eyes from the glorious Harper to the source of the inappropriate chuckle. Nothing they discussed would be humorous with the exception of Tara's idiotic requests for Scott. But then, only he and Ms. Rodriguez found her requests to be outrageous and enabling. He'd said so numerous times, and Tara ended up screeching like a banshee at everything that came out of his mouth. Ms. Perry had played the role of mediator. The principal or the assistant had been scheduled to appear at the meeting, and

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the murmurs of a woman drifted in from the hallway outside Harper's room. She stuck her head in, shot the group a one-minute signal and vanished back through the doorway. That had been thirty-five minutes ago.

Glum faces abounded, but Nathaniel kept coming back to Harper. She managed to present a serene smile, and nodded at the appropriate times, but whether she actually enjoyed this discussion remained to be seen. Nathaniel figured she didn't. Her fingers gripped her clipboard a little too tightly.

The only happy person here was Scott. He fixed the boy with a glare, and watched with budding anger how his son nestled closer to his mother as if seeking protection. She patted his head absentmindedly, but kept her attention on her nails. Occasionally she would look up, scowl at him, and then return her glare back down to her nails. Content with John Flynn acting as her mouthpiece, she only wanted to rattle the cage, but her true interests had nothing to do with Scott, that much had become obvious. Why had she come?

To get a look at him or worse, to derail all attempts he made at repairing his tattered relationship with his son.

"I've got ten minutes more, and I'm walking out," Ms. Rodriguez said distastefully, and effectively causing the blabbering John Flynn to cease his tirade in mid-sentence. "Forgive me, but I have students arriving within the next twenty minutes and I need to prepare."

Harper cleared her throat and tried to ease the sharp bitterness of Carlita's words.

"I agree. Ms. Pearson, could we come to a set plan for Scott for second quarter?" she asked, smiling that same smile she'd given them all morning. Nathaniel noticed how it only flashed across her lower face, not reaching her cheeks or her warm eyes. It was for show only, a prop, nothing real. This smile didn't hold any of the hints of pleasure the ones she gave him had held.

"We ain't done with this quarter," Tara spat, bucking up to a sitting position. "He ain't failed this quarter. Y'all—"

"Yes, he did," Ms. Rodriguez said with so much venom Tara actually gasped into shocked silence.

"I thought we agreed that Scott will have the opportunity to redo his first quarter work," John Flynn said, whining as he did

so. He folded his hands and rested them atop his belly. “The boy isn’t really ready to move on to second quarter material, having not mastered the first. Things build upon each other, do they not in mathematics, Ms. Rodriguez?”

“With the proper modifications, Scott can be successful in math second quarter,” Ms. Rodriguez said, meeting John Flynn’s lazy gaze with daggers in her eyes. “*If* he gets the support he needs at home, comes to tutoring, and corrals his behavior. Academics are not Scott’s issue—”

“What we all agree with,” Harper interrupted, slicing through the math teacher’s budding rant as she pointed at the teachers, “is that this quarter has passed and demonstrated that Scott needs a lot of assistance. Let’s start him with a clean slate and a chance not to fall further behind by making him redo work from first quarter. By doing that, he grows further behind with the second quarter curriculum, which ultimately means he will fail second quarter. That’s something we all want to avoid—even Scott.”

Scott stopped drawing on his paper long enough to glance up at Harper and scowl hard at her before returning to his doodles.

John Flynn licked his lips and Nathaniel spied his eyes staring at Harper’s delectable breasts. The man had no pride. John’s gaze swept from one full, ripe melon pressed against the flimsy fabric, to the other and he had the gall to lick his lips as if he tasted them! It happened fast; Nathaniel bolted out of his seat, fists clenched. All he could see was his fists smashing into John Flynn’s fat face, over and over again. So rapid was his action, he sent his seat crashing to the floor, shocking everyone to silence.

“Stop!” Nathaniel shouted, eyes slits of rage, and he had to force himself to stop stalking toward the other man. *Stop staring at her like that! She’s my woman, not a damn T-bone steak, you fat fuck! Back the hell up...*

John’s piggy raven eyes zipped to Nathaniel.

“Mr. Pearson? Stop what? I—I haven’t said anything.”

Nathaniel took in a slow breath and tried not to look at Harper. She wasn’t his anymore than she was John Flynn’s. Hell, he’d been allowing his eyes to feast on her since he walked in the door. He couldn’t control who checked her out. With a body

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and demeanor so sweet any man would give his left nut to have her, he could hardly knock the hell out every man who gave her an approving once over.

But God he wanted to try.

“Uh, you can stop this madness, John,” Nathaniel said, the words rushing out without pause. He could feel everyone’s eyes on him and they weighed against him. He had to repair his actions. “I agree with the teachers. Let’s start Scott off with a clean slate, as Ms. Perry said, and see where we go from there. I think arguing about last quarter is a moot point. I’ve got to go back to work. Thank you, teachers, for spending your time today on this.”

He picked the chair up and scooted it against the table as gently as he could. Avoiding the glare of Harper’s eyes, he fought the flush threatening to erupt over his face. *She has no idea of the man I am underneath. She’d been scared when I shot out of that chair, and I can’t see that on her face again.*

“Scott, I want you to do your best today. These people here care about you, and I do too,” he said to his son, pinning him with a stare so intense, the boy sat motionless in his seat—a feat he hadn’t managed throughout the last hour. Maybe Nathaniel’s display of anger had set his son to pay attention this time. “I mean it. If you want to go do fun stuff this weekend, let’s agree that you will make this week a lot different from the last nine. Okay?”

Scott met his eyes, snuck a glance at his mother, and he nodded.

He approached his son, and fought the urge to hug him. Instead he presented his closed fist. “Love you.”

Tara snorted, but didn’t say anything. He wasn’t in the mood at the moment to deal with her attitude. Not in front of Harper, not again. He wouldn’t lose his temper in front of the group again. All it took was one call to social services from a teacher and his whole nightmare could begin again. He didn’t want Harper to think him a monster. No, he couldn’t handle her disappointment, or worse, her fear of him.

“Okay,” Scott said with the air of teenager embarrassment. He met Nathaniel’s closed fist with his own and they pounded

each other. Still he was grinning which meant he liked it, to a certain degree. “Whatever, Dad.”

He called me dad. That’s a start. The love, I guess, will come later. But first he must know that I love him—very much.

They pounded fists again.

Without another word, Nathaniel stalked from the room.

Chapter Seven

Harper's heartbeat began to cease its frenzied gallop as she watched Nathaniel Pearson leave. Not that she'd been afraid of him, but his actions had frightened her because of how sudden they were. Shooting out of his chair, face a mask of anger, and it had been directed at John. Harper scanned her memory for what the portly man had done to anger Nathaniel. He had been staring at her as she spoke, but well, some men did that to women. Ogling had never been her problem, getting the man to actually think of her as more than an easy score had been the challenging part of finding Mr. Right.

Her breath squeaked through her lungs. Her classroom had become a place of dread. Sure, as the official team leader they used her classroom for parent and team meetings, and she'd tried to head off any serious arguments from flaring up. But John Flynn's constant prattle throughout the last hour had stirred the boiling pot, as he tried repeatedly to stall their attempts to develop a plan for Scott, so that had to be why Nathaniel got upset. After all, how long would anyone want to keep listening to the whining and finger-pointing that had gone on this morning? Carlita had been ready to pop off, too.

"So, we are in agreement," Carlita said, "with what Mr. Pearson said. We all vote and that gives us a four-to-two tally."

Tara stood up and put both hands on the table, leaning forward toward Carlita. "I don't give a rat's ass what the voting said or what that bastard ex-husband of mine said neither. Scotty ain't failing. Y'all teachers don't like him and give him Fs. It ain't fair."

At that moment, the assistant principal, Mary Duggins came in. Soft maple hair piled on top her head, she sat down in the seat vacated by Nathaniel and crossed her legs. She took in the scene

unfolding around her and said sweetly, “Teachers, you are dismissed to return to your classes.”

Tara scowled. “We ain’t done here.”

Mary stood up and extended her hand. “I’m Mary Duggins, the assistant principal. I’ve been listening to the conversations in here. I had a telephone call to make and a conference call after that, so I’ve been outside this classroom for about forty-five minutes, listening. My teachers are dismissed, and we need to move our conversation, Ms. Pearson, down to my office. Students will be here shortly and I want Ms. Perry to be able to give the wonderful instruction she provides each day.”

Mark and Carlita gave Harper thumbs up signs as they gathered their belongings and slinked out of the room. Harper collected her papers and scooted over to her desk, but Mary talked too firm and loud, she could still hear the conversation.

“It is not our responsibility to ensure students pass,” Mary was saying to a red faced and very angry Tara. “It is our job to present material and assist students with acquiring it. My teachers did that for Scott, and at each turn, he rejected those options. We even attempted to contact you, Ms. Pearson. Education isn’t just a teacher’s job, it’s the job of a community—including parents.”

John Flynn cleared his throat loud and hard as if trying to drown out Mary’s words, but Harper knew Mary to be smart as a whip and fearless. She confronted parents like Tara all day long, and somehow she managed to get them to be more involved and less angry by the time she was done with them. Wow.

Harper watched the trio leave, John guiding Tara with his hand on her back. *What did you ever see in her, Nathaniel? She’s a nasty, selfish woman. Why would you think having a child with such a person would prove healthy?*

Maybe she wasn’t like that in the beginning of the relationship. Harper shrugged, and checked her watch. If Nathaniel liked that type of woman, he wouldn’t be interested in her. She and Tara only shared the fact that they had DNA, nothing else.

Harper had ten minutes to make it down the hall to the restroom and back to her room before students returned from their elective classes.

"I can make it." Harper fast walked out of her room, made a right and hurried down the hallway. Passing other classrooms and teachers, she waved, but did not stop. Her bladder held until lunch on most days, but her nervousness about seeing Nathaniel had shaken the process up and now she really had to go.

Nathaniel had arrived early for the meeting, which gave Harper time to talk to him—alone. He had this amazing smile, when he gave it. It lit up his entire face, and his tanned skin coupled with those blonde strands only seemed to make him seem more surfer than laborer. His tee-shirt, again white, skipped over his rock hard muscles gleefully, and those jeans, sweet heaven, those jeans squeezed every bit of his lower body, setting his package right out there, and boy, Nathaniel's equipment came large if what she spied had been accurate.

She squeezed her thighs together as she made it to the restroom. Thinking about him turned her dials, and already dampness seeped from her sex. Her stomach tingled at the thought of that phallus balls-deep inside her and she moaned as she reached a stall. Lowering herself down, she continued to think about the ways he would take her—gently, then hard and fast until she wept with pleasure. His rough hands would skate across her darker skin, snatching her aching breasts into his grasp, and rolling her nipples between his coarse fingertips. His blue eyes would stare up at her as he licked her taunt peaks, and sucked their pebbled points into his mouth.

I sooo want him. But I sooo can't have him.

Sighing, she finished her business, washed her hands, and tried to stem the throb of her clit by squeezing her legs together. If only she could stop thinking about him.

As she exited the bathroom, she heard a hard cough.

"Uh, Ms. Perry? Harper?" called the one person in the world she didn't want to hear from.

She spun around to the voice that ratcheted up her clit's throbbing. Leaning against the wall near the stairwell, Nathaniel posed like a model. One leg extended, the other bent against the wall. Hands shoved into his blue jeans' pockets, arms flayed wide. He pushed off the wall and came up to her, cornflower blue eyes wide and too intense to stare at for long.

“Yes, Mr. Pearson?” she breathed, hating how lust soaked her voice sounded.

He smiled then, that same smile he’d given her earlier that morning. The one that actually seemed to reach his eyes and light up his face. It wasn’t the same as the one he gave Carlita and Mark or anyone else present at the meeting, except Scott.

“I asked you to call me Nathaniel,” he said, flashing those brilliant white teeth.

His kissable lips split open into a smile that instantly tugged at her love button. Clean-shaven today, Nathaniel struck a tantalizing image, and an urge to kiss and lick across his jaw line launched forward inside of her. Her heart thumped hard in her chest, beating its own SOS against her ribcage.

Surely he doesn’t realize the effect he’s having on me. I want to grab a handful of shirt and yank him down to me. Kiss me, lick me, heavens, Nathaniel do me right here on the stairs...

“Harper?” he cooed, grinning broadly at her.

Damn her imagination.

“Yes?” she managed around the stony lump of longing in her throat. She swallowed, but it didn’t go down, just like her libido hadn’t ceased its craving to have Nathaniel’s hands on her breasts and his cock buried inside her treasure trove.

“Did you hear me?” he asked, smirking outright at her now, because he knew she hadn’t. He inched closer to her, closing the space between them. Now firmly planted within her personal space, Nathaniel glanced down at her, and spoke softly, so very softly, Harper had to lean in to hear him.

“Ummm, no,” she said, “I was thinking about something.”

“So have I,” he retorted, playfully, and with the undercurrents of something sensual.

His voice stroked her as if he’d actually put his hands on her. Tingling skidded across her body and her nipples hardened at the sound of it. They’d ache for an hour because she wouldn’t be able to get his voice out of her head.

Harper blushed. *He didn’t mean anything sexual by that! He means Scott, so stop being a horny harlot and deal with the situation at hand. Pull your mind out of the gutter and back into the classroom.*

"I said to call me, Nathaniel," he rumbled down to her. She came to his mid chest, and she was wearing heels. Nathaniel was easily pushing six-three or four".

"Oh, right. Nathaniel, what can I do for you?" she asked, feeling scorching embarrassment on her cheeks and thanking the heavens her skin was darker. "I have students in about four minutes."

He shoved his hands deeper into his pockets. He fidgeted as if being this close to her bothered him. So, she took a step backward, but he inched forward, keeping the distance between them to a minimal. He angled his head down.

Okay, he wants to keep our conversation private, that's fine. He smells so good. What are you wearing? Fresh and masculine, some sport soap and a matching cologne perhaps? I love it.

"I—I wanted to apologize for my behavior today. I'm not a bad guy, Harper. I needed you to know that. I'm not a violent man, I..." He faltered, and for the first time, looked down at the ground and not into her face.

What is he going on about? He seems sincere and almost mournful. What's going on in your head?

"Mr. Pearson, sorry, Nathaniel," she said, reaching out and touching his bicep, trembling inside at the rock hard muscles flexing beneath her touch, and fighting the urge to kiss them. A zip of electricity raced up her body and she tensed, and Nathaniel flinched, but relaxed once it passed. "There's nothing to apologize for. I mean, you were obviously upset, but so was everyone else. The good thing is we did come up with a plan that will work for Scott. Sure, it will be challenging, but things that are worth it usually are."

Relief seemed to roll from his shoulders, and Harper watched him visibly relax. Had he truly been bothered that much by what she thought or by his display of parental frustration? The meeting had been a heated, tense beast for all of them. She hadn't thought anything else about it since Mary would be handling Tara and John Flynn from here on out.

"Really? You sure?" he asked, those fantastic blue orbs sparkling like sunlight on water. They threatened to capture her and pull her into their vivid azure. "I mean, I didn't scare you away or anything?"

Harper thought for a moment, but then smiled. “No, of course not. Sure, it shocked me because of the chair slamming against the floor, but I figured you were just clumsy.”

Nathaniel laughed, and the sound caused her heart to warm. Yes, she wanted to hear him laugh more often. The sound made her happy, unlike any she’d ever heard before. It came out rough and bit of a bark, but maybe Nathaniel didn’t get to laugh very much or often.

“Wow,” he said, shaking his head, hands now on his hips. “You don’t know what that does for me. Thank you so much. I really appreciate it.”

He glanced at her hand on his bicep, and rolled his eyes to her with a wicked grin etching its way across his face. She realized she had been rubbing his bicep, and she reluctantly took her hand away.

Blushing harder than ever, she took in a deep breath and released it slowly. *What’s really eating at you?*

Perhaps seeing the confusion scurrying across her face, Nathaniel explained. “Oh, I meant, how relieved I am that you don’t think I’m a short-tempered psycho.”

“I don’t think any of us believe that about you, Nathaniel. You’re a concerned father and we are glad you’re on board. It’s tough getting parents to come to meetings, let alone miss work to discuss their child’s educational future.”

“I don’t right care what the others think, Harper,” he confessed. “To be quite honest, I care about what you think of me.”

A searing blaze beneath those words set her emotional guards to ash. A heated rush trickled down her spine and spread like wildfire through her pelvis and right to her wick, causing her clit to beat furiously.

She blinked and put her gaze on the floor. She felt light and rose to cloud nine. *Did he just say what I thought he said? Me? He cares about what I think? Why?*

The bell dinged, saving her from having to respond to that particular statement, because her mind had melted beneath the blaze of her own lust.

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“Well, that’s the bell. I’ve got to go, Mr. Pearson,” she said, falling into the protective comfort of professionalism. “Have a good day.”

Without waiting, she spun on her heel and hurried down the hallway. Aware of the fast clicking of her shoes on tile, Harper tried to slow down before she fell, but her fleeing wasn’t so much from Nathaniel as it was from herself and her own desires. She had to put distance between them. He was too close to be professional, too close by far. If he touched her, she’d lose total control over herself, her body, and losing control a minute before students flooded the hallway wouldn’t be good for her, her school, or her students.

The burning twist kept going, blazing a hot little trail from her gut to her face. The base of her neck felt warm too and she knew why. She’d only gone a dozen steps when she hazarded a glance back.

Nathaniel remained rooted to the spot, his eyes on her still. The look alone caused her to pause. A rush of gooey warmth flowed over her from her head to her toes, thick as honey. She hesitated, but he remained. He stood tall, bright sunlight streamed behind him. The expression lingered, raw and unrestrained. Naked carnal urges raked through her as she headed back to her classroom.

Nathaniel’s face had been revealing.

The look alone said plain and without moderation, “I want you.”

Chapter Eight

The rest of Monday crept by at a turtle's pace, much to Harper's irritation. She kept the anxiousness out of her voice and her demeanor, but it was hard going. Every thought swirled around Nathaniel's confession that he cared about what she thought of him. Her. A teacher. A stranger. Aside from Scott's, her opinion of him mattered. And that look he gave her as she walked away. Her damp panties reminded her of his intentions and his interest.

Still she couldn't quite believe it.

Nathaniel Pearson wanted her, wanted her in the most sexy, passionate manner possible, if his expression could be believed. She finally sat down again at four PM and slipped her pumps from her aching feet. She rubbed them and sighed. Sure, he might be attracted to her, but really, she wasn't entirely unattractive. Not a spring chicken but not ready to be chopped into salad either.

She really needed her pencil sharpener repaired. Students can't well take a writing test on Wednesday without a pencil sharpener. Her heart dropped the moment Carlita walked into the room.

"You got time for a parent call?" she asked, smirking as if she knew some secret Harper should know. "I know you want to talk to parents after that wonderful meeting we had this morning."

Harper groaned. "You're serious?"

"Trust me, you want to take this one," she said, smirk widening.

"Okay, send it over," Harper groaned and rolled her chair over to the telephone in her room.

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Carlita disappeared to her room next door, and within minutes Harper's telephone rang. She picked up the receiver, thought a simple prayer and said, "This is Ms. Perry speaking."

"Hi, this is Nathaniel Pearson, Scott's father," he said, his voice shooting shivers through her body and causing all peaks to point and pebble. "I wanted to know if you wanted to go grab dinner."

"Dinner?" A quick charge of excitement zipped down her spine.

"Well, yeah, it's the meal that comes after lunch, usually by several hours."

"You're asking me out on a date?" She couldn't stop the disbelief from leaping into her tone. Her heart shot up all aflutter.

"Yeah," he responded. "I am."

"Tonight?"

"Yeah."

"Short notice, isn't it?" she countered. *I can't believe it. It's four already and he wants to call now to ask me out? He must think I'm some lonely and desperate woman. Please.*

"Yeah, it is," he agreed, and she heard the tightening of his voice. If he had been smiling before, he wasn't now. She couldn't see him, but she could tell. He probably thought she was rejecting his offer and that often made people frown. "I'm sorry about it being so late. Tara decided to switch nights for me with Scott, and I found myself available. I just got off from work."

I'm the second choice? No kid tonight so I guess I will contact the teacher. I bet she doesn't have plans tonight. After all, she's a teacher, a dumpy one, so she must be free. Never mind she was free. Her only appointment was her time spent at the gym at water aerobics, but he didn't know that. Nor did he need to know.

"Well, Mr. Pearson, thank you so much for your generous offer, but—"

"Please," he said, interrupting her. "Call me Nathaniel. Every time you call me Mr. Pearson, I feel like I'm about to be sent to detention."

She laughed. "Sorry, but really, this last minute invite is rather sudden," she said, feeling the day's stress slip from her shoulders with each rumbling word he spoke. "I would like very much to see you, but—"

"But you already got plans," Nathaniel interrupted again. "I figured you probably did, but I wanted to try my luck. I wanted to see you, again, soon."

He thought I already had plans? Really?

Carlita appeared in her doorway and strutted over to her, a wolfish grin taking up the lower half of her face.

"Ms. Perry?" inquired Nathaniel. "You still there?"

"Yes, yes, uh, tonight?"

Carlita sat down in the student desk closest to Harper's. She grabbed a sticky notepad and a pen and wrote on it. She put it in front of Harper.

It read, "Did he ask you out? Circle yes or no."

"Yeah, if you got plans, I understand," Nathaniel added.

Harper took the pen and circled yes. Carlita silently clapped. She shot her a quick nod of approval.

Harper shook her head that her friend's enthusiasm was unfounded and unnecessary. She wasn't going out with Nathaniel. Not like this, not after the scorching meeting she'd had with his ex-wife and his son.

"It's very short notice, and I have other obligations," she said, heart hammering in her chest.

"What?" Carlita mouthed. Her face set in determined lines. With her face soured, she rolled her ginger eyes and smacked the desktop. "Harper!"

Harper gave her the one-finger wait gesture and said into the telephone, "That is very kind of you, Nathaniel, but I must decline your offer."

"Well, I expected that you would be busy," he repeated. "May I ask what day I may see you again?"

Harper swallowed. She wanted to see him again, and outside of work would be better. With a sigh, she said, "How about Friday?"

"My night with Scott," he replied. "Thursday?"

"I have a class on Thursday night," she said, thinking of her gym class that met late on Thursday nights. "Wednesday?"

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“Yeah, that’ll work. Is six o’clock okay?” he asked, and she could hear the smile back in his voice.

“Yes, sure. Where do I meet you?” She grabbed her desk to still her trembling hands. Carlita had given her the thumbs up sign and was grinning so hard it looked like it hurt.

“Where would you like to go?” he asked, and she could hear the roar of cars behind him. “I like all kinds of foods, so I’m pretty easy to satisfy.”

Harper didn’t miss the loaded words. “How about Mario’s Italian Eatery over on West Market?”

“Perfect. I will try to sit on my hands until then.”

She laughed again. “I will see you then.”

“Oh, Harper?”

“Yes?” She failed to hide the smile on her own face and keep it from her voice.

“Thank you.”

“For what?” Puzzlement made her wave Carlita off.

“For meeting me at Mario’s,” he said, but it didn’t sound like that’s what he had intended to say.

“It should be fun. Bye, Nathaniel.”

“See you later.”

As soon as she set the receiver into the cradle, Carlita exploded. “Oh my God! I knew it! I knew it this morning. The way he kept staring you down, his eyes were superglued to you, girl!”

“Calm down,” Harper said, laughing. “It’s just a date. Nothing serious.”

Carlita leaned close to her and said, “Heck no, Harper. This is a hunk, but he’s a good man. You can see that all over him. I dunno what happened between him and that bitch he calls an ex-wife, but let me tell you, he’s a keeper.”

“You can’t possibly know all of that from meeting the man twice,” Harper said, shaking her head at Carlita’s weird wisdom. She began placing papers and her flash drive into her teacher bag. “He asked for dinner and I agreed to go on Wednesday. Nothing crazy or long term. A dinner date. Period.”

“Are you blind?”

Harper caught the question and stopped shuffling papers. She met Carlita's eyes and noted the seriousness on her face, something she rarely saw.

"Harper, are you blind?" she repeated.

"No, of course not."

"Neither was anyone sitting in this room this morning." Standing up, Carlita came to stand by Harper's desk. She lowered her voice and continued. "Nathaniel is in love with you, and it is plainly obvious to anyone whose name isn't Harper. He couldn't stop looking at you. When he wasn't watching Scott, he watched you and everybody here saw it. Hell, he made no moves to hide it, Harper. That man is seriously enchanted with you. For him, this isn't a dinner date. This is his time with an angel."

"Really, Carlita! You exaggerate too much. I saw him too, and he didn't sit and gape at me the whole time." Harper felt the sweltering embarrassment on her cheeks and she went back to shuffling papers and straightening her desk. She laughed but it came out shaky and unsure. "You're silly."

No, he isn't in love with me. We've only met twice. Yes, we have great chemistry, but what's that got to do with love? Nothing. Carlita and her fast love routine.

"You keep telling yourself that nonsense," Carlita mocked her. "You're talented, smart, and gorgeous, and every man at this school knows it. The only person who doesn't seem to recognize it is you. You don't see how the custodians' heads swivel when you walk by? No, because you're engrossed in your damn lessons or a book, or some fire that has to be put out."

Harper shrugged. Sure she didn't pay much attention to men, but then she was busy and her prep time only lasted ninety minutes.

Carlita's hands gently grabbed her shoulders and rotated Harper around to face her. Her voice softened even more and she said, "Harper, look at me."

Harper sighed and looked Carlita in the eyes.

"I'm not trying to bring you down, and I know you've been hurt by men before. Me too. But I don't want you to miss this chance to love, really *love*, Harper. Not the shit I'm doing over in my world. This is authentic, touchable, and true. My heart melted today when I saw how he looked at you and how he

nearly knocked the shit out of John Flynn for ogling you. Yes, that's what that was about, even if he said it wasn't. It was. I watched him, Harper. He saw John's eyes on you and he nearly took the guy's head off for it."

"You're kidding? I thought it was because John was being a jerk."

Carlita shook her head. "No. If that was the case, Nathaniel would've knocked the shit out of him a lot earlier."

Harper swallowed and met Carlita's eyes again. Here was a woman Harper rarely saw, a kind and emotionally wounded woman. She held Harper's gaze and her hands squeezed her shoulders for encouragement.

"When he presents it, don't be afraid, Harper, to take his love," Carlita said. "If you feel it too."

"Thank you, Carlita."

"What the hell you two doing?" Mark called out as he strolled across the classroom to Harper's desk. "Having some lez fest in here?"

Carlita let her go and they burst into laughter. As she turned away from Harper, she wiped her eyes.

"Hell no, Mark," Carlita said, sniffing and putting her hands on her hips defensively. "We were having a girl talk. That's all. What's up?"

"Nothing, but some news on Scott Pearson," he said, sitting on the edge of Harper's organized desk. "Mary said she finally got the mother to back off, but she and the advocate are pledging legal action if Scott fails second quarter. What legal recourse do they have? Dunno, but she mentioned her ex-husband and you."

He pointed at Harper.

"What about me?" Harper asked, her throat tightening and her stomach twisting into a knot.

"Said her son told her that you and her ex were dating, but Mary said that what her teachers did outside of work has nothing to do with their professional time here. The mother accused you of deliberating failing her son because you hated her—jealousy and all that girl shit."

"What?" Harper scoffed and collapsed back into her chair. "She can't be serious."

Mark shrugged. "Dunno, but Mary wanted to know if Mr. Pearson was dating all the teachers, including the P.E. teacher, Mr. Bears, because Scott failed all his classes, every subject. Mary said that forced Tara's mouth to close on the topic of her ex-husband and his activities, for now."

Carlita laughed and snorted. "God, you've got to love Mary."

"What does it mean?" Harper asked, head spinning, heart galloping so fast in her chest she felt lightheaded. "That if Scott fails English then she's going to take me to court? Beat me down in the parking lot? What?"

Mark gave another shrug. "Dunno, but I don't see how she can take anyone to court. We haven't done anything that violates the law and he's not in special education so the modifications we give to Scott are a courtesy, a gesture of goodwill and all that."

Carlita's eyes met Harper's and she winked. "Don't worry about it," she encouraged, one eyebrow raised high above her eye. "I will take care of Ms. Pearson."

"How?" Mark asked, the doubt plain in his voice. His eyebrows shot into his bangs. He glanced at Harper, but she didn't know any more than he did about what Carlita knew and who.

"Oh, I have my ways," Carlita said and with that strutted out of the classroom, leaving Harper with her jaw on the floor. "Later."

Chapter Nine

Wednesday evening, Mario's Italian Eatery

Nathaniel's gaze drifted across the glazed large window and out to the world beyond Mario's packed parking lot. Puzzlement kept his mind whirling, and he didn't notice the vehicles, the pedestrians and the populous at large. He couldn't quite fathom how he had come to be here, seated at an intimate, candlelit table for two. When he called her school to talk to Harper, he hadn't intended on asking her out, though the question of whether or not he should buzzed about his brain. As soon as he heard her throaty voice on the line, the words sprang unbidden to his tongue and rolled out of his mouth before he could stop himself or fully think it through.

Mario's had been independently owned for nearly fifty years, and Nathaniel could see from the polished, eclectic décor the owners had a sense of purpose in life: a smash of Italian and American artifacts littered the walls, the stone mantle around the fireplace, and the deep rich woods of the tables all spoke to hands-on efforts. He knew they specialized in made-from-scratch recipes, but he'd only tried the spaghetti the one time he'd been here. The citrus burnt cream had been the dessert he and Tara had tried together, but she instantly disliked it. He ate it all alone.

That was then, and today is heaven. But he had to be honest with himself. His confidence in whether he could woo Harper wore thin. What if she despised him?

My heart's been in repair for seven long years, surely, I'm ready. I'm steady. It feels ready each time Harper is around.

Tonight the cards are going face up on the table for Harper to see, and if she rejects them, fine, but I've got to know if she's feeling the tug I am, or am I simply mad with longing? Celibacy-

caused disillusion or does she feel the same way? I've got to know.

Harper...

At the mere thought of her name, he closed his eyes and sighed. When he opened them, he looked to the doorway of the restaurant, checked the clock, noted the time, and wondered how he was going to pass the next four minutes until six. Minutes later, she walked. He had to shut his mouth and swallow the accumulation of drool pooling there.

Sweet mother of God...

The demure, professional teacher had been stripped down and packed away neatly. Here was a woman, unafraid and wide open. She met his eyes and smiled sweetly. With a brief wave, she pointed him out to the host and he nodded, guiding her to the table he'd selected for them. Nestled at the rear of the restaurant, Harper had to walk by nearly every table in the place, and Nathaniel both despised and liked how the men kept gawking at her.

Dressed in a little sable dress, shiny bold bangle bracelets and that necklace with the diamond heart-shaped pendant, Harper Perry strolled over to him as a vision of raw, uncapped sexuality—and she didn't even know it. Jet-black shiny stilettos on her feet accentuating flashy red painted toes and those delicious calves of hers. With her shoulder length brunette hair, arrow straight and free, she was simply stunning. The dress cinched just beneath her breasts, and billowed out, but still it flattered her figure. Nathaniel rose out of his seat in a trance. He noted again, vaguely, other men falling over themselves—some literally, as she passed.

That beautiful woman is coming straight to me, fellas.

And before the night was through, Nathaniel hungered to have her coming for him, hard, loud, and screaming his name, her fingernails buried inside his back as she demanded more of his cock, deeper, faster... Yeah, that was how he wanted to cap off the perfect evening launching at that moment.

He stood up as the host slid back the chair.

"Hello Nathaniel," she said breathlessly as if the walk had winded her. She sank into the vacant seat across from him. "I'm not late, am I?"

SCHOOLED

No baby. You've arrived just in time.

When she crossed those caramel legs, his throat tightened to a dry, sandpaper strip.

"No," he said, returning to his seat. "Right on time."

"Here you are," said the waiter as he placed two thick menus in front of them and stood the wine list in the center of the table beside the glass-encased candle.

"Oh, good," she said, picking up the menu. "I had to go home and change."

"If you wore that to school, you'd get more students to do more work," he said without thinking, his cock a solid staff of steel beneath the table. He liked the dress. It set those delectable globes right up front, an appetizer before the feast. But he wanted her to keep it on, and at the same time, he wanted to peel it off her.

She shot him a sharp look. Her eyebrows rose as she said, "Meaning what?"

"Meaning you look gorgeous," he said, opening his menu too. He kept peeking over its rim to stare at her.

"Thank you," she said, a bit of surprise in her voice. She kept her eyes on the menu, not looking at him.

Nathaniel spied her over the thick edge of his menu once more. Her menu shielded his view of her cleavage. She was still fetchingly beautiful.

No. He didn't have any semblance of a choice. She held him fast without even realizing she had captured him. *This is a compulsion.*

"So, do you eat here often?" he asked, mundane and cliché to be sure, but he didn't care. If it meant she would speak, gracing him with her honey-streaked voice. It was worth a bit of corniness.

"No," she said, connecting her eyes to his. "You?"

"Not in years," he said dryly. "Harper?"

"Yes?"

"Thank you for coming tonight."

She set down the heavy menu and those butterscotch eyes met his. "That's the second time you've thanked me. What are you are really thanking me for?" she asked, artfully plucked

eyebrows rising in question. Her flawless hands tented in front of her as she leaned onto the table. "Confession session."

He smiled, charmed by her. He couldn't halt the spread of his grin and she tapped her fingertips together and said, "Waiting."

"All right, but only if you confess something too," he retorted, putting his menu down too. Happy to have his view unobstructed, the day's stress began to melt away. "Deal?"

"Agreed, now start singing," she said, tossing her hair over her shoulders, something she did without thinking and with complete grace.

"I keep thanking you because, well, because you're presence here is a gift." He mentally scrambled for words that adequately defined his feelings, but he found his explanation wanting. "So, I'm thanking you for making today nice."

"Wow," she said, hand at her throat. She sat back in her seat and crossed her legs. She fingered the necklace and its heart.

"Your turn," Nathaniel said. "Confession session."

"Oh, right." Harper visibly relaxed. "Okay, here goes. I was blindsided by your call Monday."

It felt so right, being with her. Time sped up as it often did when he had a good time, and the boisterous noise of Mario's faded into the background, becoming nothing but a soundtrack to the fairy tale unfolding around him. Too long lost in the worn tapestry of life, Nathaniel actually began to feel alive again in her company.

"Sir, are you ready to order?" the waiter asked.

"A glass of chardonnay," Harper ordered, a giddiness bubbling from her person made the waiter pause.

"Uh, water," Nathaniel said, groaning inwardly. He hadn't even glanced at the wine list, he'd been so captivated by her. "For now." The waiter nodded and drifted away as quietly as he'd come.

Harper picked up her menu. "I guess we better order. What to get?" she asked, mumbling as if talking to herself.

"Order whatever you want. I'm getting the check."

Harper smirked. "Fine, but don't expect some other form of payment in return."

"I don't," he said softly. *Did she really think me that kind of man?* "I'm not going to lie and say I don't think you're beautiful."

"Ah, but I bet you say that to all the girls," she bantered playfully.

Nathaniel leaned back in his chair.

Harper looked up and their eyes met once more.

"You're the only light I ever saw in a room full of dim bulbs."

Harper's face stilled; the humor leached out of it by the draw of his words. She dropped her gaze to the menu once more, as if the clouds had masked the sun's warm rays. Nathaniel wanted her sunny personality back on full tilt.

Was that too much too soon? Talk to me, Harper.

"And no, I don't say that to all the girls." He didn't like the spiral of emotions sprinting across her face. No clear winner indicated some confusion, and confusion bred chaos. Something Nathaniel had a bit too much of already in life.

"Are we ready?" the waiter asked, again making them both flinch. Nathaniel heard the waiter's polite cough, and he finally turned his attention to the ancient man with the halo of puffed white hair. He gave Nathaniel a lip smile—no teeth and nodded at the menu.

Nathaniel's mind blanched. "Yeah, sure," he said, his eyes on Harper. She gave him a slight nod. But the somber expression didn't leave at the prospect of delicious food.

The waiter faced Harper. "Excellent. Madam? For you?"

"I'll have the chicken and spinach cacciatore," she said in a small voice so hushed it hurt Nathaniel to hear it.

"Fantastic choice, ma'am," the waiter said approvingly before pivoting to Nathaniel.

"I'll have spaghetti." And to his surprise, Harper snorted, smiling at him again.

"Yes, sir," the waiter said and snapped up the menus. He shot a dark look at Harper before again heading off into the throng of waiters, waitresses, bussing personnel and arriving guests.

"What's so funny?" Nathaniel asked, happy she laughed. "I enjoy spaghetti."

“Nothing, nothing at all,” she said, before bursting out with a string of giggles. “I’m sorry.”

“For what?”

“This is all so, so wonderful and awkward at the same time,” she explained, wiping her eyes from the tears of laughter gathered there. She rubbed her nude arms briskly as if cold. He’d warm her, hold her, and chase the chill from her luminous flesh, if she’d but ask.

“But?” he inquired, certain there was more. As much as it pained him to say the next two words, he had to know if he was wasting his time and hers. “Tell me.”

“But, I teach your son.”

He watched the flash of emotions ripple across her face and he despised the conflict this caused her. He never wanted to be the source of any discomfort or pain for Harper. To see her fine features marred by stress bothered him.

“Are you a teacher now?”

“No,” she said, tucking a strand of hair behind her ear. She hazarded a glimpse at him before putting her eyes back on the tablecloth.

“So, it’s not a full time gig?”

She blushed. “No, of course not.”

“Do all the teachers look as damn hot as you do right now?” he asked, smirking outright at her, and deliberating tracing her body with his eyes. She had to see how stunning she was and how damn hot she made him.

He waited. As much as he wanted to, he couldn’t keep her happy and seated across from him. Those thick eyelashes brushed her lower eyelids as she thought. Soon she met his gaze and he realized some decision had been made inside Harper. His belly bunched up in anxious worry. Oh how she reduced him to an awkward, horny teenager.

I wonder if Scott feels this way around girls. Clammy hands and nervous stomach. I’m going to have to talk to him this weekend about the fairer sex.

“You’re absolutely right,” Harper said, folding her arms into her lap. “Let’s enjoy this.”

SCHOOLED

Her words were balm to his battered soul. The sparkle of mischief ignited once more in her eyes and Nathaniel wanted to spread his arms wide and embrace the light pouring from her.

“Whew,” he said.

She cracked up.

The rest of the meal went without hiccups or any heavy discussions. He ate slowly, savoring the garlic and herbs in the tangy sauce. He talked about Scott, his job, and his dreams. Harper shared her challenges, her classes, and her career goals.

It came so easily.

After the major plates had been collected, he nursed a coffee. She ordered the double chocolate piece of cake. She forked a chunk of the moist sweetness into her mouth with gusto. Without hesitation, Harper ate—she enjoyed her food the way people were meant to delight in food. Nathaniel couldn’t keep from staring out of his mouth, nor could he stop his phallus from stiffening.

Harper’s plush lips slowly skimmed the cake from the fork and he wanted to be the fork, gliding in and out of her mouth. Her tongue licked the fork and it instantly became his member, hard as the silver in her hands, he couldn’t stop seeing her pink tongue sliding over the head of his stiff erection.

Nathaniel failed to stem the groan, and Harper’s eyes snapped to his.

“You want some?” she asked, eyes wide and round in complete innocence of the question she posed and the effect it had on Nathaniel.

Damn, do I ever want some of you. “Yeah, I do,” he croaked.

“It is *so* good,” she said and gently set the plate in front of him.

He took a small nibble, imagining the sweet chocolate icing to be her nipples. Though he swallowed and nodded that it was good, he knew that what he really longed to taste was her.

Chapter Ten

Harper's hand rested against her satisfied stomach. The inky-black A-line dress hid her excessively round, content belly bulge from Nathaniel's roaming eyes. Since she arrived, he hardly looked at anyone or anything else. Unsettled by the hunger growling from his stare, she'd tried to make light, breezy conversation, but when he said she was beautiful, all the air zipped from her lungs.

He's incredibly smart to be a construction foreman. Each word sounds like he means it, but am I being conned here?

Carlita had talked her into the pricey dress and shoes, did her hair and makeup, and told her to have fun. Judging by the open mouth gap on Nathaniel's face, Carlita did excellent work. *She totally missed her calling as makeup artist.*

Harper risked it and looked at him. She saw the fire burning inside his brilliant blue eyes.

"This has been wonderful, Harper," he said, voice stroking her clit as if he was right up on it. She watched him pay and once done, he rose, extending his hand to her in a princely gesture. "Let's blow this joint." He gave her a devilish grin as his steady gaze raked over her, lighting her wick.

Her heart leapt as her hand touched his. He pulled her to her stilts for shoes and she trailed behind him as he guided her through the myriad of tables, booths, waiters and hosts, a dinky in a sea of uncertainty. Somehow he steadied her wild emotions. Emerging into the velvety night, Harper shook her head to try to ground out the rising joy inside of her. Sailing light as a balloon untethered and free.

He gently followed her to her car. For the first time since she'd scrimped and saved for the sporty red two-door, it was not the object of her smile. No, tonight she smiled for one thing—

Nathaniel. Her cheeks already ached from the massive grin plastered on her face.

"I had a really nice time," she said meekly. Her voice was nearly unrecognizable as she searched his handsome visage for any hint of unhappiness or worse, apathy. *Please don't be kidding with my feelings, teasing them the way a cat toys with a mouse.*

He grinned down at her, and pulled her close. She let him. How things had progressed so fast, she didn't really know. A silence crept around them, thickening with sensual mystic.

"So did I," he breathed, his fingers caressing her face, guiding her chin upward with the faintest touch of his index finger. His hands, tender and rough, shot quakes to her core.

"I'm going to kiss you. Okay?"

"Yes," she hissed, snatching him to her and surprising herself. Her back bounced against her car's door. Her eyes drooped closed. The biting flash of pain disappeared beneath the smolder of his kiss. He let go of her hand and locked his arms around her waist, pulling her ever closer.

Yes, this is heaven. So soft, tangy and wet from the pasta sauce and coffee, sweet and bitter.

His tongue tangoed with hers, seducing her. The heady kiss exposed her to his hot mouth, and created a humming in her body, making it vibrate. He broke free first, stepping back.

Her eyes sprung wide at the loss of his touch, and she found his burning stare intense. Her own eagerness melted to wet cravings, drenching her panties, making her thighs slick. At that moment, he stepped toward her again, unable to be away from her. He dropped tender, feathery kisses down her neck and onto her collarbone.

"Say something, Harper," he said, hugging her to him and shooting her a compassionate smile. "Don't be angry with me. I got carried away. You are so delicious."

She squeezed him to her shuddering body as his warm breath skated across the outer shell of her ear. This close, his body's fire blazed through his clothes torching any restraint she possessed.

"I liked it," she confessed, placing her head against his chest. "It was nice."

“Nice?” he scoffed. His torso shook with amusement. She looked up at him, her chin resting comfortably on his chest.

“Very nice.”

“And you teach English?”

She laughed. “Thanks to you I’m pretty speechless right now.”

“Good,” he said playfully. “I want to make you happy, make you feel good and to hug you.”

“Uh huh.” *Sure, hugging is all he wants to do, and I’m Martha Stewart.*

“No?” he rotated her around so that her ass brushed the stone staff making a sizable impression in his jeans.

Yes, Nathaniel’s hardware’s width wound Harper’s lust even higher. He wasn’t just interested in hugging her either. That thick rock was proof. And she wanted all of that hunk of hard cock filling the emptiness that stretched out in a needy ache from the apex between her legs.

An ache that both scared and pleased her. *Where did that come from?*

“I can’t hold you like I want to here in this parking lot. Besides, we’re displaying a lot of public affection right now. Are you nervous? Should I let you go?”

“No!” she said firmly and snuggled closer to prove it. Unable to stop her ass from rubbing against the object of her delightful torment, Harper sighed. Her long dormant pussy twitched in eagerness to grab hold of its counterpart. Relishing the rush of warm pleasure flowing over her, she ground her buttock against him again. “I don’t care that it’s not right to have your arms around me.”

“Who said it was wrong?” he breathed, the faint flicker of concern slithering forward through the dense layer of lust in his voice.

Tara.

Harper pushed it out of her mind. “No one,” she said quickly wetting her suddenly dry lips. She added, “But we can’t stay here, not like this.”

SCHOOLED

Now I'll be a monkey's uncle if that didn't sound like a proposition to take me to his house. He probably thinks I'm desperate and lonely and easy to...

He let go and moved around to face her. She leaned against her car. Chilly, she instantly wanted his arms back around her. An emptiness she never noticed before made itself known.

Pacing restlessly, hands shoved into his pockets, he turned to her with a pinched expression. He rubbed his face and said, "I—Harper, you should go home. Now, I had a fantastic evening, but I think its time we headed on."

She frowned.

He didn't want her? He was kicking her to the curb? Didn't he hunger for her as much as she did him? Harper's head began to spin. She glanced down at his crotch and noted again the tangled swell of horny hunger there. A perplexed expression stained her face, and it was so vivid she felt it.

Well, he's stoked about someone.

"Okay," she said, standing up straight and putting her nose into the air. He didn't want her. S'okay, but physically he did. "I've got to teach tomorrow anyway." She threw her shoulders back, adjusted her purse on her shoulder, and said, "Thank you."

With her heart fluttering and a bout of sadness looming, Harper reached the driver's door before he yanked her backward into his embrace.

"I can't help it, Harper," he growled across her ear. His voice was lush with liquid heat. "I want you."

Instantly he released her. She spun around, the boiling anger spiraling across her face. Heart racing at his touch, she couldn't stand it. Her sex stirred, but fury fed her words now.

"What!" she cried, close to tears of immense frustration. "Want me? Are you sure? You just told me to get going on home. Now you want to be with me?" She avoided his eyes, voice trembling in anticipation of his response. "Why?" she bristled.

"I'm trying to restrain myself, Harper," he muttered fiercely, and she heard the thick layer of control breaking in his tone. "I'm not going to lie to you. I like you a lot. And my God, I want to tear that beautiful dress off of your fine ass."

Harper's breath caught. There it was out in the open. Nathaniel's real feelings.

What a gentleman. He's trying to be honorable. How had I been so blind, not to see the writing on the wall? Carlita had pegged it the moment he approached the parent-teacher conference table.

She draped her arms around his muscular neck, and kissed his cheeks. Instantly, he locked his arms around her waist and moaned.

"Harper, don't kiss me there..."

His voice wrenched something primal and animalistic from deep within her. So thrilled with his declaration, she dove into his chest, planting kisses against the thin layer of his shirt and rubbing the hard muscles there. Within Nathaniel, a dam must have broken, because the next thing Harper knew, she was pressed against the driver's side door, her legs wrapped around his waist.

Without warning, his hands slid down the hem of her dress, and drew it up to her mid-thigh, damn close to her waist. Slipping his fingers through the curve of her panties, his fingers brushed her swollen and moist outer lips. Eyes at half-mast and burning in lust, Nathaniel tickled the pulsating tip of her clit with one hand. He held her firmly in place with the other. Thick digits slipped through her slick folds, and she heard him grunt into her ear.

"Oh!" she squeezed her eyes shut.

"Damn, Harper! You're so wet. You ready like this for me?" He stole her answer, swallowing it in his deep, soulful kiss. He cupped her ass, before his fingers zipped around to her pelvis. Thrusting his fingers into her moist, aching tunnel, Nathaniel whispered as he released her lips. "I can't wait to be inside you—so tight, so wet, damn Harper. You're driving me crazy." He leaned his torso into hers pressing his solid muscles against her soft breasts with their pebbled peaks.

"Please, Nathaniel," she pleaded, snatching fistfuls of his shirt and her hips matched the slow rhythm of Nathaniel's thrusting fingers.

SCHOOLED

"Please what?" he mumbled against her mouth, tugging her lower lip between his teeth and nibbling. He brushed the tips of fingers over the wet spot between her legs.

"I...oh my, *God!*" Harper shrieked, seizing his shirt as her hips' rapid thrust froze; the rush of pleasure plowed through her. Her inner muscles clutched and massaged his fingers until she could stand it no longer and whimpered in pleasure, the beginning of another orgasm mounting. She rode the waves of rapture until her breathing dipped down to normal again.

"Yeah, gimme that lovely moan. Do you like how good you feel? I want to make you feel good all the time, Harper. Do you want me to do that?"

"Yes," she cooed.

The light displayed his muscles tensing under his shirt as he cradled her against the car. Several people cast curious glances in their direction making her ears burn in embarrassment. Nathaniel removed his hand from her still quivering cove. She unlocked her legs and stood, grabbing the car for stability. He squatted down and adjusted her panties. He even fluffed out her dress.

That was so impulsive! And not at all like me. What was I thinking? In a public place! My goodness, a parking lot? Her logical mind rebuked her actions and it sounded amazing like her mother.

I've got to get out of here and home. Maybe I'll be able to save face.

"Harper," Nathaniel held her by the shoulders. Perhaps he anticipated or read the urgent need inside of her to flee from the situation and speed on home to safety. "That was so sexy."

Despite her nervousness, his compliment made her smile. If he had treated her like a whore, then the entire incident would've been worse. Looking him in the eye would've been out of the question.

As it was, he hadn't. So she met his gaze without embarrassment.

"I want to see you again," he said, one hand resting lightly on her waist. His fingers curled under her chin, titling her face up to his gaze. "May I?"

"Yes," she said without hesitation.

“Thank you,” he muttered and brushed her lips with his.

Undaunted, she yanked him in deeper, pushing through the tiny part in his lips. Breathless, she broke the kiss before they both became too involved in it. With a croak, she whispered, “Goodnight.”

“I will, now,” Nathaniel said.

And as Harper’s feet finally touched the ground, she climbed into her car. She saw Nathaniel watching her, rooted to the spot where her car had been, until she couldn’t see him anymore.

Chapter Eleven

Friday evening, outside Tara Pearson's Home

Nathaniel switched off his truck and waited for his son to come out of the dilapidated structure with its peeling paint and weather worn front screened-in porch. He sighed, leaning his head back against the leather seat and relishing, once more, the feel of Harper in his arms. He'd spoken to her on the phone a handful of times and those conversations lasted for hours. His ears devoured her voice, her words, and her laugh, committing all to memory.

I miss you, Harper.

The two days between that first date and now had done little to reduce her scent from his nostrils, her voice from his ears, and her kiss from his lips. Her full lips ghosted his own and he licked his lips, hoping to taste her again. Longing for her wouldn't make her appear, and he sighed in disappointment. He had, at minimum, two more days until he could see her again. The past two days had been too long for him to wait to see her again. Adding two more to the wait seemed horribly cruel.

His week since his fabulous dinner had crawled along as if handicapped by the event. He dwindled away his evenings playing Sudoku and watching movies, but even these intense actions failed to stem the thoughts of Harper. So, to rush the arrival of a new day, he'd gone to bed early each night, shortly after his evening run. There, too, he could find no peace. Plagued by steamy thoughts and dreams so vivid, he awoke the next morning with his lower abdomen covered in the dried evidence of his lust for her.

Masturbation was a lonely act. Regardless of how vivid the fantasy or how real the orgasm, the aftermath left an emptiness that permeated the rush of pleasure.

Feeling like a teenager at the memories, Nathaniel shifted in the seat, and opened his eyes. He glanced toward the house again and seeing only the living room light on. What could he do when his subconscious mind languished in lust for Harper? He'd head into the bathroom, shower, and dress and leave for work.

Work, physical and sometimes hard. At least there all sizzling notion about Harper could be restrained. Kept busy and focused on goals, Nathaniel had very little time to devote to the cocoa-skinned beauty with the kind heart. Surrounded by sweaty, irritable and sometimes gruff males didn't liken itself to sexy imaginings of his son's teacher.

A car zipped by and the headlights' glare forced Nathaniel to check his watch. Ten minutes late. Tara never actually released Scott to him on time. It annoyed him, but saying anything to her about would only make her deliberately extend just how late she released Scott next time. Tonight was different. They had a movie to see, some comic book hero film, and Nathaniel didn't want to be late getting a good seat. His time with Scott had to go off without a hitch, not that everything would be perfect. Nathaniel had long since stopped believing in miracles and make-believe. Still, making up for lost time was complicated enough without minor infractions like tardiness and a verbal argument with Tara derailing the process.

"Come on, Tara," he muttered to himself.

A good thing I left forty minutes early. I figured she'd try to punish me after my outburst at Monday's meeting. And this is petty but true to form for her.

At that moment, the front door slowly opened. The porch's light bathed the square, screened-in porch in a dim yellow glow.

At least she cares enough about Scott not to send him down the walkway entirely in the dark.

Beneath the crusty, over-processed exterior, Tara loved Scott. The glitch was she loved herself more, much more.

Instead of seeing the lone shadow of his lanky son, two figures stepped through the screen and proceeded to drift toward his truck. The scarlet circle of Tara's cigarette floated eerily in the gloom. The cigarette's gleaming tip, an angry red eye surrounded by somber night, came steadily closer. A trail of hazy

white smoke fanned out behind Tara, but just as swiftly was consumed by night.

Great. The darling demon smoked and grumbled like a chugging locomotive as she made a beeline right for him. Trapped. Damn. *What's wrong now? More child support? What the hell does she want to talk about?*

Since Nathaniel re-entered the folds of society, he tried to sever the unhealthy bond between them, not because he despised his ex-wife. He disliked her plenty, but as the mother of his child and a person he once vowed to love until death parted them, Tara had to be tolerated. His love for Tara died years ago when she allowed her lover, some guy named James, to set Nathaniel up for a drug charge. Nathaniel never did illegal drugs, but the crack had been discovered in his car, beneath his seat.

Nathaniel mentally extinguished the mounting memory before it gained too much momentum.

Too late to do anything about it now. She didn't stand up to her lover, nor did she tell the district attorney, the cops, or anyone that the shit wasn't his.

Yeah, false charge and a crack head boyfriend would definitely put a strain on a relationship. It made good fodder for films, but not real life.

Instinctively, his mind sought out a happy, pleasurable image or experience to dwell on. He'd learned this coping mechanism while in the cage, when he needed to escape the mayhem and the muck of prison life. It sometimes became too much, especially since he didn't belong there—he hadn't committed a crime.

Harper winked onto his mental canvas as he first saw her over a week ago. Supple brunette strands surfing the forced air breezes. Brilliant, honey-brown eyes, plush lips stained a rich wine and a scent like lavender, soft and gentle.

She smiled in his memory and automatically, Nathaniel returned it in reality. His cock bobbed happily and stiffened at the mere mention of her name in his head.

So with a cool detachment he could only summon when dealing with Tara, he climbed out of his sleek Nissan Titan, walked over to the curb and waited. Tara reached the end of her walkway, and with a shove propelled Scott to him. Nearly

falling, Scott wheeled right into Nathan who gave him a brief hug.

“Later, Mom,” Scott’s apathetic whine grazed the crisp fall air. He threw a hand up in a wave before turning back to his father. “Hi, Dad.”

Nathaniel smiled, his heart warmed by the tiniest touch of enthusiasm. Scott flashed a brief grin before heading to the passenger side door. Hoisting himself into the cab, Nathaniel noted how Scott looked away from Tara’s narrowed eyes. Scott’s arms crossed over his chest and he stared stonily out of the window.

Good. We’re making headway. Slow, but some. Since the parent teacher conference Scott’s been less disruptive in every class, especially Harper’s. We’re definitely going to talk about it over pizza, after the movie.

He remained standing, even though Scott’s energy and impatience began to grow. With careful eyes, sharpened by the hazard time in jail, Nathaniel watched her. He could smell the bourbon from the brief five-foot distance between them. Tara. No wonder Scott was so glad to leave.

Tara swayed with the breeze, a weak branch—one ready to be broken off. Chilly air rustled through the thick oak and dual magnolia trees. Even as the coolness slipped across his blonde buzzed strands, the faint hairs on his neck stood in erect alertness. Something sour scurried up his throat, but he clamped his teeth together so hard his muscles ached.

“You...you...think...you so damn...smart,” Tara slurred and dragged each word out so that the short accusation seemed to take nearly ten minutes to complete. “Gotcha some whore with an educated.”

Nathaniel fought to keep the scowl from his face. He didn’t correct her. Harper Perry was many things—smart, sexy, kind—but a whore she most certainly wasn’t.

Instead of allowing Tara to successfully bait him, he said, “Sorry, Tara. Dunno what you mean.”

“I saw ya all into that black bitch teacher. Embarrassin’ how you dun damn lowered yaself,” she croaked.

Anger growled inside him. He released a heavy sigh and shoved his hands into his jeans.

SCHOOLED

If anything, I've come up in terms of beauty and quality of person. But you wouldn't see that now or when the light of sobriety grazed your ass.

"Dunno what you mean, Tara, and far be it for me to argue with a drunk."

Her eyes became slits and she took one unsteady step forward, prompting Nathaniel to take one solid step back, away from her and the danger she presented. When Tara became mean like this, anything could happen. Nathaniel didn't want to be in anything that may involve the police. Not that he didn't trust the boys in blue to treat him fairly, he did. His credibility would have been ruined.

"Whatcha' call me?" she asked, tittering on the curb's edge in her dingy sneakers and faded jeans. "You do one chasin' afta some black project bitch."

"That's twice, Tara, you've called her names," Nathaniel rumbled, voice thundering like an approaching storm. His cool demeanor evaporated like ice on a hot plate. "I don't know what's got your goat, but put it to bed."

Facing contorting into hatred so deep, Tara hardly resembled the woman who'd just been standing there. With her index finger jutting at his chest, Tara snarled, "Yeah. Dat cunt got it comin'. Scottie flinks and Ima have her job."

Nathaniel's blood boiled, and he opened his mouth to issue a warning of his own, when Scott opened the passenger side door.

"Come on! You two hate each other, so what are you talking about?"

"Be one more second," Nathaniel called jovially, shoving his rage down into his belly, where it churned in uneasy swirls.

He turned back to Tara. "You leave her alone. Or I will be prompted, Tara, to get real serious about those papers," Nathaniel warned. "And that tape."

Tara's eyes became the size of saucers. "Git!" She waved him off with her glassy eyes locked on his. Mouth gaping in what she must've believed was a smile. She stood there waving her fingers in unsteady circles.

Without a word, Nathaniel stalked to his truck and climbed in.

“Seat belt on?” he asked Scott, huffing out the last of his ire. “Yep.”

Nathaniel clicked his belt and cleared his throat. He cut a glance at Scott.

“Oh, sorry dad,” Scott said. “Yes, sir.” He grumbled beneath his breath. Nathaniel let it go.

“Better,” Nathaniel said and tousled Scott’s blonde hair.

He pulled away from the curb, fighting his urge to run up on it and over Tara. But that wouldn’t solve any of his problems and only create new ones. *Not with Scott in the vehicle. Not ever. She’s already stolen so much from me. I’ll not let her take more, especially not Harper.*

If Tara meant to harm Harper, he had to intervene. But how? Harper made it clear that being involved with a parent called in a lot of questions and put her under a microscope. *No, she can’t throw away her career. Not for me—an ex-con. No, she deserves better.*

But if he left Harper alone, Tara would win again. *Not over my dead, decomposing corpse will I allow her to take this opportunity from me. I like Harper and maybe given time and a chance, I could grow to love again. I’d like no better teacher than Harper.*

“Dad?” came the hushed inquiry through the thick swirl of his musings.

“Yeah?” Nathaniel blinked and left his subconscious to tease out a solution to his dilemma.

“How come you didn’t, you know, write me and stuff?” Scott tossed in a disheartened shoulder shrug that tried to convey his apathy, like it didn’t matter. But it did.

I was wondering when you were going to ask. I’ve dreaded this day forever, but you deserve to know the truth. “Truth is, Scott,” Nathaniel began choosing each word carefully, “I did. I wrote you letters and sent you cards I made for you. I tried to call you many, many times, but I didn’t always have the right number. Remember too son, you were just a little guy then, five years old when I had to leave. I didn’t want to leave you. I love you. I never stopped caring, not even when trapped inside hell.”

Tara was the reason for the disconnect between him and his son, and had made sure he knew none of his letters got through.

She kept moving and changing phone numbers so often that finding Scott had taken a private investigator. But, blaming her for this would only pull Scott between Tara and him; he wanted to soften that unhealthy bond eventually, but for now it remained.

Scott turned wide eyes from the blurred landscape to Nathaniel. "Yeah?"

"Yeah," Nathaniel replied around the lump in his throat. It both pained him to know Scott had spent the last six years believing his father didn't love him. "Gimmie a chance," Nathaniel held out his fist, "to be your dad again."

Scott searched his father's profile intently before answering. "Yeah, whatever," he replied lazily and pounded his father's fist with a light tap. Nathaniel grinned into flashes of oncoming headlights. Warmth spread through his chest. Surliness lingered, but not Scott's usual sharpness today. "You know what Ms. Perry told me today?"

"No, what?" Nathaniel's grin grew broader at the mention of Harper's name. Curiosity over what she said overrode the usual emotional responses that arrived when he thought of her or heard her throaty voice on the phone.

"She said that I had smarts, and I should use them more often."

"Smarts? So, what's wrong with that?" Nathaniel could tell by the stain of disapproval on his face, Scott didn't like it.

"I ain't smart," he complained.

Nathaniel blew out a puff-mixed sigh. "You are."

"Man, whatever," Scott balked, folding his arms over his bony chest retreating.

"Harp—uh, Ms. Perry is trying to prepare you for next year. Go easy, son," Nathaniel explained.

"You just sayin' that because she's your girlfriend," Scott accused.

Nathaniel forced a laugh. "No, she's not my girlfriend." *One date doesn't a girlfriend make, son, though I want it to be true.*

"That's what mom says."

"Yeah, well, your mom's mistaken," Nathaniel said as neutrally as he could and pushed all his irritation at Tara back down before it spewed out of his mouth.

"Yeah? How come you're all red in the face?" Scott mocked him.

"Because, I'm, well, I'm embarrassed."

Whatever Scott thought his father was going to say, it wasn't that. "You are?" Scott questioned, surprise changing his voice. "Why?"

"Why? Well, because it's embarrassing for me, after I discussed your behavior with your teachers, for you to continue to misbehave."

Scott slouched down in the passenger seat. "Whatever."

"No, Scott," Nathaniel said gently. "Whatever is how you've played it, but that doesn't work. Not for you or your future. So tonight's movie will be your last, if the acting out continues. Don't get me wrong. You've made huge gains in your grades, hence the movie tonight. But the acting out, especially in math, has got to stop."

"No..." Scott groaned.

"Yes. We'll do other things like...like...*fishing*." The boy sunk into sulky silence. Nathaniel felt a twinge of guilt. But as the parent, he had to address Scott's continued misbehavior. Now that he had, they can concentrate on having fun. *And it kept his mind off of you and Harper. Fair play next time, Nate, fair play.*

The corner became illuminated with the hundreds of bulbs lightening up the front panels of the movie theater. The parking lot resembled a car lot, stuffed to the gills with vehicles. Nathaniel nudged his son as he circled looking for an available space to park his Titan. It couldn't fit into any snug spot.

"We're here!" Nathaniel blurted out, and playfully jabbed Scott's shoulder. "T-minus twenty minutes and counting. We've got to get popcorn, soda, and chocolate covered peanuts before they lower the lights."

"Chocolate covered peanuts? Awesome!" Scott's eyes scanned the bright movie theater lights and pedestrians making their way across the street from the parking lot. "Oh, I mean, whatever dad."

SCHOOLED

Nathaniel grinned; for a brief moment his son showed a natural response before he covered it up with apathy, a glimpse of the child underneath the forced grimace. *Harper, I wish you could see Scott now. How excited he is, and better, he is here with me.*

Somehow Nathaniel knew she would've enjoyed it.

Chapter Twelve

Saturday morning, 8701-D Elm Street, home of Harper Perry

It's only been one week and three days since the conference. Really, he wasn't that great to still be buzzing in my brain like this. Yes, he's a hunk and yes, he made me melt into a puddle at his booted feet outside of Mario's, but damn it. That was several days ago!

With her hair pulled up and her face free of makeup, Harper padded around barefoot through her condo's kitchen with her mug of steaming coffee clasped in her hand. She passed the bar and the three leafy green stools as she crossed from the warm beige tile onto the French vanilla plush carpet. The light carpet complimented the deep chocolate end tables and Italian leather sofa. Worn by years of her taking naps on it, it still managed to steal the spotlight in her little boxy room. The plasma screen television hung above two recliners in matching leather as the sofa. Gifts from her parents when she first bought the condo, she had them for years. She often slept on the sofa during a movie, a football game or even to the late news. Slumber in her bed felt lonely. Could be the huge queen size bed dwarfed her as an individual, and the couch's limited space made her feel less alone. With her favorite pillow and comforter, Harper would wrap herself up like a cocoon and sleep less fretfully on the sofa.

Amongst the cream and chocolate design, simple vases, African masks from Ghana and Ethiopia lined the walls, mixed with African American modern art. Her collection had grown since moving to North Carolina, but despite how comfortable, cozy and calm she made her home, it never seemed to chase out the whispers of loneliness from her ears. Amber candles shot scents of vanilla and honey into the air. Her bedroom had become a miniature office; lesson plans, teaching manuals,

resources, and college education books lined the floor, the bookshelves and the desk in her bedroom, transforming it into something similar to her classroom. During the nights when her hunger to have someone to hold had kept her awake, she would get up and work. Read her email, write new ones, blog about her teaching life and check her Facebook page, before heading into the living room and diving onto her sofa. She'd eventually fall into a light sleep from sheer exhaustion.

I've got to get out of the house. Go see a movie, get a facial, or something to stem the tide of Nathaniel Pearson threatening to drown me, consume me—hell—devour my drive to do something productive.

Try as she might to actually go do something Friday evening, she found herself waiting for his call. She'd spent the rest of the evening, jumping each time her phone rang, and straining her ears when in the bathroom for the familiar ringtone she'd assigned to his number on her cell phone.

This has got to stop. Harper went to the floor-to-ceiling window and gazed out onto the fresh morning. Quiet and peaceful, the day unfolded without much fanfare from her. Although Nathaniel hadn't called her, she knew this was Scott's weekend and they had a late evening of movie and pizza planned. Still his not calling her made her feel less important, an afterthought that could be so easily forgotten for good. Harper switched the University of Tennessee mug from one hand to the other and sighed.

I've got to stem the funk threatening to overcome me. Yes, I like Nathaniel, but really, I can't make him the center of my universe. After all of these years dating off and on, not being satisfied, I should know better than to put all my eggs into one basket.

Nathaniel and she had spoken every day up until yesterday. His lack of attention had left a void in her evening.

Her telephone rang, its shrill blaring sliced through the thick smog of internal dialogue and musings, making her jump.

The coffee sloshed in the mug, but didn't spill onto her ivory nightgown. Harper headed to the phone, placing the mug on the bar before reaching for the green telephone beside the refrigerator. She glanced at the clock. 9:30am.

Mother, I'm really not in the mood to discuss the family's latest drama and deviant behaviors. I just want to...

The ringing seemed to grow louder, demanding she relieve it of its burden—the call.

She sighed and picked it up.

"Hello?" she inquired, hating she hadn't checked the caller id first. She could barely hear the person over the pounding of anxiousness in her ears. "Sorry. Say again."

"I said, good morning beautiful," came the deeply rich voice of one Nathaniel Pearson.

Harper's belly buzzed at the mere sound of him and she had to swallow repeatedly to conjure enough saliva to form words in her dry mouth. She cursed that she'd left her coffee sitting out of reach on the counter. It would've done wonders to wet her mouth.

"Harper?"

"Yes, I'm here," she said, fighting to still the giddiness gliding up her body in a series of quiet shivers. "Good morning to you, too."

"I'm sorry about last night. The movie ran longer than I expected and the pizza place had a wait too. Friday night..."

It all sounds like a line of fiction by the worse writer possible. Punish him for hanging out with his kid? That's not only stupid, but childish. I can't believe I'm a bit envious of Scott's time with his dad. Shit.

"Don't worry about it," she heard herself say in that voice which told people who knew her that they should worry about it because it bothered her. "Spending time with Scott is important for his development into a contributing adult to our society."

Damn it. I've started speaking teacher at him.

"Uh, okay. So you accept my apology?" Nathaniel asked. The wrinkle of worry in his voice remained. "I mean, I know it's important for me to stay with Scott and hang out with him. It's also important for me to show you that I am serious about us."

"Us?" Harper scoffed. They'd had one date. Talk about putting the test scores before the lessons. She liked him too—a lot, but the reality was it had only been a single solitary date. *And that one date had you pinned to your car with his fingers*

wrist deep in your pussy making you beg him to fuck you. Yeah, that's nothing—nothing at all.

Harper gasped and then pushed it aside as hastily as it had come. *Everyone could succumb to a bout of lust. That's what I'm chalking it up to—horniness and serious bout of depravity.*

“Yeah, us,” Nathaniel retorted filling the tense silence. “I mean, I’m going to put my cards on the table and show you, Harper. I’m not going to let you walk away from me without us following this through. There’s something between us. Call it what you want—a chemical reaction, desire at first sight, this attraction between us is deeper than anything physical. Surely you feel it to?”

You want me to confirm it for you, Nathaniel. Yes, I feel it too, but can I trust it? Can I trust you?

“Harper? You still there?”

“Y—yes, I’m here, and yes, I feel it too,” she answered, her voice wobbling in her hesitation.

And he heard it.

“But...”

Her heart ached from the deep hurt resounding from that single word. *Surely he can't think there is much more than a desire to have sex. From one meeting for ten minutes and a dinner date? He can't be thinking with the right head over there.*

“But, to say it’s more than chemistry is a bit rash,” Harper plowed on, pushing her doubts out into the open clearing for Nathaniel to inspect and attack. Taking in a deep breath, she added, “Especially since we’ve only had one date. I am not a fast woman, Nathaniel, despite what happened on our first meeting together.” She really didn’t want to say it. She loved the way his innuendos made her feel sexy and desired. What she really wanted was an excuse, but she had to say the right things. She was his kid’s teacher, for crying out loud.

“I’m sorry if I am moving too fast for you,” he paused as if looking for the right words. At least, that’s what she hoped he was doing. “I can tone it down if that’s the way you really feel.”

“I...” Did she want that? Hell no! But it was one of those things good women said. “No,” her confession was whispered because she was too afraid of the truth to say it out loud. “I kind of like it.”

She leaned against the fridge door and closed her eyes. The quiet that met her explanation spoke volumes. Nathaniel breathed deep and slowly into the phone as if trying to regain some composure or collect his thoughts. Either way, he hadn't liked what she said, not at all, but Harper wasn't one for grand illusions or romantic rosy glasses. Nope, as a realist she knew love had to be nurtured, fed, and allowed to grow over time, not something that erupted fast and quick like on Lifetime.

After all, she hardly knew him.

"I guess I can see your point about it being only one date," he said gravely, voice so soft it seemed to be crushed. "May I ask that you join me on Tuesday night for another date? I'm serious about us, Harper, and I'm going to prove it to you."

Harper smiled. *Tenacious aren't you, Nathaniel?* "Yes, Tuesday is a good night for me," she answered, a bit saddened by the fact he hadn't asked to see her today or the next.

As if reading her mind he said, "I would ask you to join me tomorrow, but I have Scott until five and then I'm sure you have teacher stuff to do before Monday. Classes and all..."

She laughed. He had no idea how caught up with lessons she was at the moment. Aside from teaching the college class and few trips to hike and kayak, she didn't really have much in her life.

"So Tuesday?" he inquired.

"Yes," she said, and then the idea burst out of her mouth without clearing her logical mental gate. "How about I entertain you tomorrow? I mean, if you're not doing anything after five."

"Uh, no, I'm free to be with you," he said, surprise making his voice ripple through the phone and her heart beat faster. "What's up your sleeve? Are you wearing sleeves?"

What am I doing? He's supposed to chase me! Not the other way around.

Harper had to be honest. She longed to see him, and getting to know him better was part of the nurturing step for love to grow roots. Intrigued and more than a bit baited by how he handled her on their initial date, she yearned to feel his lips once more and to relish the tweaking of her clit he'd performed before—and to her growing horror, she wanted more from him. She wanted to taste him, to lick the expanse of his chest, to

kissing and nipping the tips of his nipples. Waiting any longer to see him would be torture and she didn't want to be tormented any more. Two days had been plenty arduous enough. She hungered to have his arms wrapped around her, his petal soft kisses along her collarbone, up her neck and right to her mouth.

Yes, she *had* to see him tomorrow.

"I'm going to cook for you," she said, smiling as the idea began to blossom in her mind. "Real spaghetti. American style. Salad, wine, and perhaps a little dessert. Hungry?"

"Starved," Nathaniel said, the double meaning rushing her ear and making her sigh.

Harper stilled allowing his words to sink down, lower across her clutched stomach and right into the little furnace between her thighs. Right now it burned hot and as she lifted her gown with one hand, she used her shoulder to cradle the receiver. Her other hand slipped between the slick folds of her core, gliding over her damp desire until finding the stiff little knob of pleasure. She shuddered in a sheer sensual body wave as she caressed and tugged at it.

"That so?" she cooed into the phone. "What do you want on the menu instead?"

Nearly instantly, he replied, "You."

"You going to eat me, Nathaniel?" she asked, and just as she said them, the implication of their other, more adult meaning landed home, and her clit beat faster at the sex talk.

"Hell yes! I wanna taste you, Harper," he said, without even hesitating to think about what she meant. He knew. The thick lust made his voice heavy with want. "I'm going to lick every inch of your chocolate body, if you let me."

Fingers flying over her moist mound, Harper sighed, not caring if he heard her heat pushing through the line. She threw back her head, nearly losing the receiver before she thought better of it and dropped her gown.

"Was that a moan?" Nathaniel asked playfully. "What are you doing over there, my naughty teacher?"

Harper blushed, but was far too close to stop.

"Are you touching those luscious breasts right now? I want to be there with you, baby," Nathaniel confessed, the husky words wrenching up the shivers racing through her, making her

nipples jut further through the satin gown. "Imagine my mouth on those beautiful hard points."

Harper could see him, bare-chested and leaning over her in her kitchen. His eyes glittering with lust as his yummy mouth wrapped around her nipple, and his wicked tongue lashed at it.

As the fantasy erupted around her, Nathaniel continued to talk to her, telling her the ways he wanted to fuck her, ways he wanted to make her come and ways to make her fall asleep in blissful joy in his arms. He recited these wishes and wants without the slightest bit of embarrassment, and she masturbated to his voice. So strong and raw was his desire, it leeches straight through to Harper.

"Oh, Nathaniel," she moaned, the speed on her love button going too fast, her hand was a blur. "Oh, oh..."

"Yeah, baby. Damn, you sound so hot. Come for me, baby," Nathaniel coached, groaning deep from the back of his throat. "Let's come together."

Come together! Oh my! He's doing it too!

The image of Nathaniel sitting on his bed, naked and stroking his cock shot Harper right up to her pinnacle without passing go or collecting \$200. She screamed and dropped the receiver, bucking like mad as the orgasm slammed through her body.

"Yes! Yes! *Damn!*"

When her ceiling stopped spinning and her breathing dropped to somewhere close to normal, Harper retrieved the phone and placed it against her ear. She laid her flushed face against the cool kitchen tile and managed to breathe.

"You still there?" she breathed, hand at her throat.

"Yeah," Nathaniel said, a soft laugh followed. "You were so stimulating, I, uh, yeah, I need to go wash up."

Harper blushed, though thankful he didn't see it. She couldn't believe he'd taken her down like that—over the phone!

"Oh, oh, yes, I understand," she stammered, feeling suddenly very self-conscious. "I will talk to you later."

"See you tomorrow?" he asked.

"Yes, tomorrow. Six o'clock," Harper added, not totally sure if she wanted to face him after the phone sex they'd just had.

SCHOOLED

“Perfect,” Nathaniel said and he sounded as if nothing had happened. “Next time, Harper, I want to be inside you when you scream like that.”

Unable to utter much more than a squeaky “oh,” Harper opened her eyes and stared at the UT mug but it didn’t render any answers or witty comebacks.

“Was that too over the top?” Nathaniel asked and laughed. “I can’t believe how open I am with you. I’ve never been like this with anyone. You aren’t mad, are you?”

“No,” Harper managed around the rock in her throat.

When Nathaniel comes tomorrow, he’s going to want to have sex with me. And I had just gone on and on about how I wasn’t fast and how we need to take it slow and... Oh damn.

“You all right? You sound strange,” Nathaniel said, concern making his voice softer. “I want you to know there isn’t any pressure Harper. Sex isn’t all that, but I’d be lying if I didn’t say I wanted you. I didn’t ask you out to be friends. I asked you out because I like you, a lot.”

“I,” she stuttered, took a deep breath and said, “I will see you tomorrow at six.”

“Okay.”

“Bye,” she blurted out before slamming down the phone, heart racing to flee her body.

Too late. Tomorrow she’d have to be careful, safe and super non-sexual with him, or they’d end up on the table, the floor or her bed. At the speed they traveled, the two of them may end up on all three surfaces before tomorrow’s sun set. Not a good situation for a teacher and a parent to be in. Up to this point she could tell the principal or Tara or anyone that she and Nathaniel were friends, but once he entered her garden, she knew with absolute certainty, there would be no exit for him—or her.

Chapter Thirteen

Sunday, 8701-D Elm Street, home of Harper Perry

Nathaniel wiped the thin sheen of nervous sweat from his forehead. The directions to Harper's condo had been easy to follow and he managed to arrive more than ten minutes early for their dinner date. Her place of residence had been a part of a new citywide restoration. The beginnings of an upscale neighborhood sprawled lazily outward, encompassing her twenty-story building. He'd been buzzed in by his beauty; only her voice greeted him and it spurred on his desire to see her. Exiting the elevator ride at last, Nathaniel stepped out and onto the nineteenth floor. Heart racing and throat dry—yeah, he was in serious trouble, both his heart and his body. After yesterday's hot phone sex, he'd been more ready to see her.

I do want her. Damn if I don't, but tonight I'm going to be a gentleman.

Checking the neat bronze numbers emblazoned on the rectangular signs, he made his way down the corridor. The tee-shirt kept his black button-down shirt from sticking to his back. Inhaling the wafting scents of jasmine and light lavender, Nathaniel's speed increased. Not wanting to seem too eager, he slowed down as her condo number came closer.

He'd reached the end of the corridor, and there it was.

This is it then. Dating had been so much easier when people dined alongside them. Being alone with Harper wrenched his tremendous hunger to dizzying heights. Yes, this would be a true test in self-control. He drew a breath, released it, and pressed the metallic oval to the left of the door.

Lord, allow me to control myself when confronted with her amazing exquisiteness.

SCHOOLED

Nathaniel blew out the rest of his silent prayer just as his angel opened the door and appeared before him.

“Good evening, Nathaniel,” she said, her voice a gentle caress across his face. She smiled warmly. Plump lips spread wide, decorated in a rich shimmering mahogany.

“You look ravishing,” he said, handing her the bouquet of tulips. “I got these for you.”

“Thank you,” she said, inhaling them as he entered the condo. “Just take a seat on the sofa. Dinner has about ten more minutes.”

He took in her surroundings while making his way to the sofa. Chocolate leather and smooth as a baby’s bottom. Expensive tastes, his Harper had.

Cozy and warm, it feels so much more like home than my place. Beautiful, like the woman to which it belongs. Many things are so neat, and arranged just so. This is definitely her home, a reflection of her organization, and her attention to details.

The aroma of rich marinara, garlic, and roasted onions rippled through the air. He sat gingerly on the sofa, at the edge, very much symbolic of how he felt around her—edgy. She locked the door, placing the chain to secure herself with him.

“I’ll put these in water.” She sniffed the flowers. “We’re only waiting for the bread to finish baking,” Harper explained, her glittering eyes brilliant as she hurried to the kitchen. “Be back in a bit.”

Harper looked so stunning. Dressed casually in khakis and a crimson polo shirt, Harper walked around the place with bare feet. The matching scarlet nail polish gleamed from each toe—glossy highlighting the earth colors of her skin tone. With her brunette hair pulled back into a ponytail, her cheeks glowed with something he couldn’t put his finger on. She seemed happy as she hummed. Bopping and flitting around the kitchen, Harper moved about energetically.

Nathaniel moved over to the bar so he could gather more eye-fuls of her. The center island had been transformed into a miniature buffet table with plates, bowls, and beverages. Her ample, heart-shaped ass met his gaze as he peered into the

kitchen. He wanted to see more of her, so he climbed onto a stool.

"Anything I can help with?" he asked, leaning over the counter, careful not to knock over anything.

She stood up from the oven, putting the bread onto the stove with her moss-green mittens clasped over the pan's searing ends. With her ponytail bouncing, she wiped her brow and turned to him. She snatched off the oven mitts and tossed them casually onto the counter. She picked up a glass of white wine and placed it in front of Nathaniel.

"I thought you could use this," she said, patting the bar's cool marble countertop. "It's the same brand as the one I ordered at Mario's."

Wow. I can get used to being like this with her, and coming home to her every day, holding her tight every night. It would be the very definition of bliss. Ah, Harper, you are the key to my happiness.

"Thank you," he said. After a sip, he smiled and added, "Fabulous. That bread smells wonderful. You make it yourself?"

"Nope, it's the kind you buy the dough and bake at home," Harper said sheepishly. "I'm no baker. I can cook okay, but the whole Betty Crocker thing isn't me."

"I'm starving," he said, and added, "Besides, you can make me bologna sandwiches and I'll think them to be a gift from heaven, especially since I've had crap for breakfast, lunch and dinner for the last six years."

"Oh yeah, like what?" she asked idly setting out the plates and moving them to the bar.

A sigh-mixed-breath and then silence, before Nathaniel answered, "Really crappy stuff that came out of a can, or leftovers."

Harper tilted her head and brought her eyes up to his. That wasn't what he was going to say, and he knew she noticed. But what else could he do? She didn't really want all the details of his prison life.

"Where did you get crappy food?" she asked cautiously as she popped the bread from the pan and onto a cutting board. "You cook for yourself?"

SCHOOLED

“Uh, no, not really.”

He grabbed the wineglass and gulped down a mouthful of courage to face those luminous honey-brown orbs again. When he did, he found a puzzle expression staining her features, but soon she smoothed them out.

“Not tonight. This evening you’re going to eat well.”

She placed the bread in front of him. Over the next few minutes she didn’t look at him, but busied herself with moving the salad bowl over, setting out the dressings and other accoutrements of dinner. He moved to help her, but she shooed him back to his seated position.

“I got it,” she claimed, still avoiding his gaze. “You paid for dinner last, and since I don’t have a wait staff, it’s all me.”

“No problem.”

She lifted the bowl of steaming spaghetti and hoisted it from the island to the countertop. Without missing a beat she strolled around to the side where the bar stools waited and climbed onto one beside him. She smelled like fire, onions and garlic. Fantastic.

“Eat up.” She began cutting thick slices of warm bread. “Don’t tell me its crap later, either,” she added with a wave of the knife.

“Thank you, Harper. It looks delicious,” he said, carefully using the pasta spoon to deliver the noodles and marina to his plate. “And I can already tell this isn’t crap.”

And you aren’t stupid. So smart and perceptive. I’m going to have to tell you the truth, aren’t I? But I think you want to let it rest until later, and I certainly don’t want to risk ruining the evening.

“Don’t tell me you’re bored already?” Harper teased, giving him a small smile.

There had been boring activities in his prison life. Huge, vacant holes in Nathaniel’s existence had successfully sucked little bits of energy from his motivation. A leech that crawled from those holes and greedily devoured him, leaving a husk of a man who had once been whole. He’d allowed it, filling them in occasionally with fluff, fast women, and fickle modes of fun.

No longer.

Eating alongside Harper, he listened intently, watching her rays of sunshine shrink the holes in his being into pinpoints of nothingness.

She swallowed and commented, "This is yummy, maybe because you're here."

Nathaniel's mouth stopped at once, her comment pulling him back into the moment. "Thank you," he said, watching her jaw work on the mouthful of pasta. Again, he noticed how she ate with gusto.

"So how's Scott?" she asked.

"He's difficult, angry and obstinate, but I think I'm breaking through the barrier. Slowly."

She rotated toward him. "It's going to go slowly, you know."

He nodded and continued. "He's had a difficult patch to tread through, but we're working on it."

"Super," Harper said. "I'm glad he's finding his connection to you again."

He got up, unable to sit as guilt swamped him from his head to his feet. Scott was not the easiest kid to like, he knew that. The fact that he hadn't been there to be a father to his son was the number one reason. The choices he had made had been difficult ones, but they were ones he had thought he had no other options at the time. He had been dead wrong, but he couldn't expect Harper to understand that. He was going to have to tell her the truth about his long absence in his son's life soon. He just wished he knew the right words.

"I'm glad he's finding his connection to you." She sat up straight on the sofa. The hollow teacher voice crept into her tone. "He's had a difficult time. I'm glad you're back in his life."

"You sure as hell don't sound like it."

"Well, I am," she said, crossing her arms over her chest. "He's my student, and I see him every day. I know him. Believe me, I'm pleased you're back in his life."

"Really?"

"Yes, really," she retorted incredulously. She followed him as he retreated to the living room. She trailed with relentless fervor. "He's one of my students. Of course, I care about him."

He's a lost boat bobbing aimlessly in a storm of uncertainty. His mother's a louse, and his father's a..."

Nathaniel stood like a stone. Cold from his head to his feet, his heart squeezed with ice. *What did she think of me? Truly? Down deep?*

"What about his father? Go on," he pushed in a hush so quiet Harper gasped. *I'm a fool to think she could love me.* The acidic disdain in her voice sliced him to the quick. *I thought she cared about me, about Scott.*

Horror raced across her face. Harper dropped her eyes and clasped her hands over her mouth. She might've sworn, but he couldn't be sure.

"Go on," he repeated. "Tell me about Scott Pearson's father!"

She winced as if his words hurt her.

He could hardly breathe. Still he wanted to hold her, and make sure she would smile again. Conflicted and torn, Nathaniel reached for her. Had she meant something horrible right then, about him?

"I—I won't lie to you," she stated, spine ramrod straight as she squared her shoulders and met his gaze. Her chin jutted upward. She didn't take his hand, only gave it the briefest glimpse. "I thought his father's absence left him scarred and distrusting. I believe his mother's irresponsibility and selfishness has hindered him too."

Nathaniel fought back the scowl threatening to erupt. Sure, she taught him every day, but what gave her the right? His circumstance? She didn't know anything about him.

"You don't know anything about us. How can you stand there and judge us?" he asked, voice breaking in his realization she had perhaps pinned her insights on the surface stuff she witnessed with Scott's behavior. "You don't know what I've—what he has gone through outside of the damn classroom."

"I'm not judging you, Nathaniel. I'm only telling you my thoughts, my observations of Scott when you and his mother aren't there. I read his journals, listen to his conversations with classmates, and watch his interactions with his peers. He's distrustful of everyone, including you and his mother. I am not trying to pass judgment. Please understand that."

She stepped to him and at last took his outstretched hand.

Instead of fleeing, he let her touch him. Her hand lay heavily on his forearm. But he didn't leave. Repealed by her gentle caressing, his flash of anger seemed to be smooth over by her strokes.

"I'm sorry." She cautiously closed the distance between them, at least physically. Emotionally, the chasm existed. "Nathaniel, please. Your absence has made a deep impact on him. There's no getting around that."

"I know," he whispered. "I'm... Yes, you're right. I messed up by not being there for him. I'm doing my best to be there now."

But acknowledgement did little to remove the hitch in his chest. She thought him a failure, and to be truthful, he hadn't been there for Scott. The reasons why didn't really matter; the end result remained the same.

She took another step and waited, lips curved into a warm, apologetic smile. He struggled to stay angry, to somehow impart the pain she'd inflicted right then back at her, but he couldn't. Instead he swallowed the agony she crafted and closed his eyes. She had been right, observant and honest. She hadn't lied to him or tried to appease him with bullshit. He needed honesty right then, no matter how bitter the pill had been to swallow.

He put his arms around her and pulled her into his embrace. Relief washed over him, and he squeezed her to him. "I did hurt him, yes, but I am making up for it as best I can, Harper."

She wrapped her arms around his neck, drawing him into her. He massaged her scalp. He tugged the ponytail holder from her soft strands to gain greater access. Harper moaned, melting against him. He loved how wonderful and warm she felt in his embrace. The stitch eased in his chest, though her blatant words of judgment simmered in the back of his mind. He touched her chin and lifted her lips to his. The kiss drove something hot and deep inside him. She felt like heaven. Unlike their joining in the parking lot, this kiss differed. Slowly, unrushed, and with tenderness in his heart, their lips parted in mature agreement.

Sweet! So lovely!

Harper melted herself into him, pressing against him with such vigor, he stumbled to keep his balance. He dropped his

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arms to stroke her back. She broke the kiss and with her eyes at half-mast, she breathed. “Wow. You’re forgiven as long as you help your son.”

Nathaniel chuckled, desire burning through him. Harper led him to the sofa, and she sat down, patting the spot beside her. Hair free, she glowed, a beacon in the gloom his life had become.

“Scott is a great boy,” he explained as he settled in beside her. “Really. You should see him. It’s Tara. A dark storm cloud of negativity I’ve only just begun to deal with.”

Harper nodded, eyes meeting his without judgment. “I’m sure underneath his aggression is a boy who is smart and engaging. But to be honest I don’t see the real Scott enough.” Their hands remained enveloped in each others. Never had he felt so comfortable, so accepted.

“Nor do I.”

Harper gave him a peck. “I know. I applaud your efforts, Nathaniel. You have a large mountain to climb.”

“Yeah, but he’s worth it.”

“He is,” she agreed and wrapped her arms tightly around him. “Yes, he is.”

Chapter Fourteen

Harper hugged him close to her, pushing her body against him, unable to stop touching him.

"I like that," Nathaniel declared, a voice like velvet gliding across her body. "Thank you for listening. I'm sorry I sounded so defensive."

Harper snuggled closer to him.

"I understand the challenge and the frustration."

She closed her eyes and allowed him to hold her. The gentle rise and fall of his chest as he breathed soothed her. Relishing the silence and the warmth of his embrace, she smiled. This was nice. What would it be like to come home to this peace every night?

A bolt zipped through her as her as his lips traced invisible lines of across her ear, down her neck, and along her shoulder. A blaze of heat arose in their wake. He carefully tugged the collar of her shirt back to expose her sensitive skin to his lips and to gain greater access to her flesh.

Harper sighed. He was there, right in her house, right in her arms, and right next to her nexus of hunger.

"You smell nice," he whispered against her ear, sending ripples skating across her body. Nathaniel's words kept stirring Harper's arousal, bringing her liquid heat to a boil.

She smiled. "Thank you." A simmering cauldron ready to explode, Harper kissed him deep. He tasted like marinara and wine, a spicy sweetness she savored.

"You're welcome," he answered, laughing gently into her ear, tugging on the lobe with his teeth.

Harper licked her parched lips. She was so tightly wound she would pop. She didn't know him all that well, not really. Yet being here with him felt so right, so good and it wasn't all hormones.

There was no ignoring the chemistry between them. She could feel the electricity streaming between them, and as she reached up to kiss him again, shockwaves coursed through her body. She needed more than kisses this time. She wanted him.

She began taking off her shirt, throwing it aside. She stood before him and dared him with her eyes to take what she was offering. Enough with the teasing, she wanted him badly, and she was showing him.

She loved the way his eyes widened as she stood there. His breathing became labored as she offered herself the only way she knew how.

“See something you like?” So not like her, but she was through with waiting.

“Bad, but I like it,” Nathaniel confessed, pulling his shirt over his head, though much slowly. He took her hand and guided it to his rigid cock. As if it were silk, he molded her hand around his aching need and said, “I’m dying, Harper. Make me feel alive. Will you?”

“Yes,” she hissed, twisting her nipple through the lace of her bra. She drew her bottom lip between her teeth and moaned. She’d felt the outline of his huge tool—wide and long. It would do wonders for igniting her lust.

“Yeah, do that again. Damn, yeah, fuck, you look so good.”

She did, not because he asked, but rather because mounting horniness wouldn’t allow her to come down, or retreat. Not now. It was far too late for backpedaling.

Harper slipped out of her khakis and solicited a groan from Nathaniel as he watched intently. Following the leader, he dropped his pants—and to her surprise—his boxer-briefs to the ground. He came toward her in slow, languorous movements. Hunger rippled through her at the very sight of him—tight abs, pink nipples pointed with lust, and a rigid rod that bounced as he stalked toward her. A light brushing of hair scattered across his chest begged for her lips to drift across.

She did once he came within striking distance.

“Sweet Jesus, Harper,” he growled as her lips connected to his flesh.

He touched her shoulders, smiling at the contrast of their skin tones. His cream and her cinnamon, a sweet concoction of

carnal delights. His hand drifted down her shapely arm, a white canoe on a warm river of cognac.

"So soft, supple," he breathed, voice a hoarse croak in the quiet air. "Mmm..."

A forest of goose bumps broke out across her skin as Nathaniel trailed candy kisses down her arms to her very fingertips. He was taking his time, driving her crazy with the slow deliberate nature of his loving. Grabbing his head, she drew his lips to hers and eagerly sought his tongue, ravaging the sweet places as a pirate would plunder and steal the goods with zest.

"Lay down, baby. Let me look at you." He broke the kiss far too soon, gesturing toward the sofa. He didn't have to ask her twice.

She lay down and her eyes dropped at once to her heaving chest.

"So sexy," he croaked before he lowered his head and drank from the luscious container her pussy created. Nipping at her swollen lips, the burning fire in his loins leapt high—ready to consume the ample beauty before him. "Oh, Harper, moan like that for me. Just like that. Let me hear it."

Trailing a path from the opulent orbs, he kissed and pecked a trail straight to the entrance of her cove. Dark and tempting, it beckoned to him, his cock bobbing in a wave.

"Nathaniel please..."

Unaccustomed to being on the receiving end of a man's manual manipulations, Harper's hips bucked and thrust in vain attempts to capture his mouth. Her squirming made it difficult for him to stay on the sofa.

"You are so impatient," he accused playfully blowing against her hot button. The ripple from the breath bolted through her sending Harper in hysterics.

"*Damn!*" she screamed, surging off the sofa. "Nathaniel, I want, I want..."

"What?" he asked, smiling up at her as he playfully slapped at the wickedly tempting triangle. "Tell me what you want, and I will give it to you."

"I want you. *You!* Nathaniel!"

She closed her eyes and relished the words rushing from her mouth. Beyond desire, she wanted him, and she longed for it to

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be forever. True, they'd only met and true he was her student's father, but right then, it all seemed to perfect, so right, so what-she-needed, she wanted it for good.

She opened her eyes when he took one of the pillows and guided it beneath her ass, lifting the glorious globes upward and at a good spot. Sliding the pillow under her, Nathaniel growled at the sight of her spread open for his pleasure. She loved hearing proof of his desire; she especially loved that she had made him feel this way, desperate for her. He brushed her hair from her eyes. So beautiful against the rich chocolate color of the sofa, Harper made the tingling in his gut flood his system.

With her legs parted, an open invitation, Nathaniel kneeled before her. He wrapped his hands around his rigid rod, where already droplets of dew clung to the tip of his head. He brought it up to the glistening lips of her shaved mound. Hairless except for that soft strip of tightly coiled ebony curls, it beckoned to be serviced, worshipped.

"Look at me," he said, and her eyes flicked up to his. Nathaniel's face broke into a grin. "Do you want me, like this? If you don't tell me now, or I won't be able to hold back."

Shuddering from his width nestled against her outer entrance Harper's eyes latched onto his and noted how much he hungered for her. She was a raft in the storm raging through her. She lifted her hips and clasped his delicious purpling head of flesh between her slippery folds.

"Goodness! Please! I can't, Nathaniel!" she begged, grabbing her hands on his shoulders, nails buried inside his flesh.

The bulbous head slipped between her slick folds, soliciting a gasp from Harper.

He growled, and he dipped his head down to her neck and kissed. Harper's long lustrous legs nestled around his waist, locking in her efforts for deeper satisfaction. She met his thrusts with vigorous action. He plunged in deep and quivered as his aching balls slapped against her apex. Each lustful moan pierced his ears and wrenched up his rhythm.

"Yes, oh, harder," she urged, eyes still open never letting her gaze wander from his face as if she meant to memorize it.

Staring into that warm liquid heat, Nathaniel's cock twitched inside her. The climax came within reach and he kept plunging.

"Yes, yes," Harper whispered into his ear. "I want to hear you say it."

"Love, you're divine...lovely...sexy..." he rambled. Losing himself in the folds of her steaming heat. "Oh, baby." Pistoning his hips fast and furious, Nathaniel's words blurred into a string of syllables.

Harper dug her nails into his shoulders, anchoring herself as the frenzy shook them both. The rancorous rush bowled them over and erupted with Harper's body tensing in immense pleasure.

"Yes!" she screamed. Her body tensed and bucked upward, and frozen in the passion as the spill of the orgasm shook through her.

"Harper," Nathaniel groaned and then all words failed. He slammed into her, burying himself to the hilt until he erupted inside her hot core.

He remained like that until they both became relaxed, breathing returned to normal, and sweat cooled on their flesh. She rolled onto her side and gave him some room to do the same. They faced each other, and his arms pulled her close to him. Brief and light kisses and giggling abound as Harper hugged him. Their conjoined bodies hardly fit onto the furniture, and she knew she'd never feel the same way when she looked at the sofa again.

She would never look at Nathaniel Pearson the same either.

Or Scott for that matter.

Please let love always feel like this. Harper prayed as she closed her eyes, feeling Nathaniel's heart beat steadily against her ear.

* * * *

The cool glass reflected the overhead beams of sunlight as they streamed through the patio windows and skylights. The gentle rocking of her body pressed against his felt so nice. He wanted to remain that way, forever entwined with her. He lay so

close he could feel waves of heat emanating from her beautiful skin. Harper's smooth flesh felt wondrous beside him. He enjoyed the gliding together their bodies seemed to do all on their own, a melody of light and dark filling the entire space the sofa afforded. She seemed so sultry. He rose up on an elbow and gazed down at her, drinking in her creamy skin and wide, contented smile. Her hair splayed across the chocolate leather, Harper seemed ready to be devoured again. Already his cock throbbed.

"Oh, boy," Harper said, chuckling with a deep throaty sound. "Round two?"

"If you're game, so am I," he answered, murmuring in her ear. "I want to touch you, taste you and be inside you."

"Do it," she whispered, wrapping her arms around his neck and lowering him to her lips.

Amazing.

When she drew back, Harper's eyes held the glassy heat of lust and it made his stomach clinch tighter. She arched her back, thrusting her round, breasts upward toward his mouth. At her offer of such sweetness, he nearly cried. Her nipples were long and tight and begged for his mouth. The areoles circled them as eagerly as his tongue. He dropped a light, butterfly kiss across the peaks, alternating between the twin globes, barely touching them, but enjoying the trembling each quick peck solicited. Each groan and sigh from those moist lips.

"Love me, Nathaniel," she whispered, her fingertips tracing the tattoos littering his biceps. "Wow, all inked over. Makes you look so yummy and extremely naughty."

Nathaniel grinned.

"Oh, I'm going to show you naughty, baby," he said and straddled her waist, slipping his hands beneath her hips and lifting those full cheeks toward his rigid rod. His hands gripped her globes eagerly, and he laid a quick *smack* against one of them, watching her quiver beneath him.

He positioned himself at the opening of her core. The woman made him want to scream in pure, pleasurable agony. It hurt to want her this much, but he couldn't get enough of her. He needed more time to explore every succulent section of her body, her heart, and her soul. Right now would have to do.

“God, don’t tease me!” Without waiting for him, she thrust her pelvis against him and engulfed his length, making him shudder. “There, I’m going to teach you a few things.”

Nathaniel met her strokes, and positioned his hands on her waist to steady himself from teetering off the couch. Harper clasped both her hands onto his forearms and alternated between speeding up and slowing down so deliciously he hissed at her.

“Woman, you are tempting me...”

“To do what?” she asked with a wicked smile on her lips.

“This!” He stole her rhythm, slamming his cock to the very edge of her inner cavern and drawing a scream of pleasure from her lips. “Yeah! Like that?”

Harper’s gorgeous legs lifted and slipped around his waist, anchoring her to him as he lost himself inside her warm honey pot. She made him dissolve into nothing but raw sensations. How she managed to make him a pool of steaming longing, he didn’t know or care. He couldn’t be happy without her, wouldn’t do without her, and wouldn’t *be* without her. Ever. In all things Tara was not, Harper blew him away and more.

All thoughts, questions, and the room vanished beneath that soulful sweetness.

Chapter Fifteen

James Tennison Middle School, two weeks later, Thursday

Harper whistled happily as the lock slid into the space with a thud. Her classroom's overactive air conditioner blast blew her hair across her eyes as she at last wrestled the ancient door close. Despite the long arduous day, her body and soul sung as if renewed. She felt light, as if she floated down the hallway, while her co-workers labored out to the parking lot as if the weight of their students had been physically placed on their shoulders.

"You look awfully happy," snapped Carlita as she slung her heavy teacher bag over her shoulder. She sagged a little to the left. "Been like that for over two weeks now. I've got to get me one of what you got."

"It's going all right. Sorry, *chica*, but they don't make any more of what I have. He's unique."

Really. Nathaniel's love was better than a spa. Seeing him after school today would only continue the schedule of lovemaking sessions and sweet, two person dinners, hikes, and movie watching. She loved cooking for him, and she enjoyed watching him pad around her place in his bare feet and tight jeans. It seemed so *right*. As if her entire world awaited only his placement in it before rotating on its axis again.

"Must be nice," Carlita said, smiling at her knowingly.

"You seein' parents now?" came a vicious spat from behind them, making her jump. "Are you ready to git goin'?"

"Fuck," Carlita whispered beneath her breath.

Harper adjusted her purse and tossed her car key to her other hand as she turned around. Her heartbeat raced, even as it grew cold with dread.

Tara Pearson.

“Afternoon, Ms. Pearson,” Harper said gently. Carlita didn’t move. Tara’s eyes moved from her to Carlita and back again. “What can I do for you?”

She forced her nerves to settle. Something raw ravaged across Tara’s demeanor and it made the hairs on the back of Harper’s neck stand up in alert.

“You thinkin’ you got a great thing with Nate?” Tara asked, hands on her hips, arms akimbo. Glassy green eyes loomed from a drug-ravaged face. Frazzled blonde strands stuck out in wiry desperation, a physical representation of the woman’s emotional state.

Calling the school resource officer might not be a bad idea about now. The woman could attack and that would put her in the most precarious position, legally and for the school.

She’s here for a brief discussion about Scott. She said Nate, but perhaps she meant Scott. Woman hasn’t ever been wrapped too tight. I did leave her a message about how awesome Scott’s behavior had been as of late. Maybe I’m getting ahead of myself.

Blowing out a deep breath, Harper gave Tara her best teacher smile. “Scott’s behavior is improving. His grades are not wonderful, but they are improving as well.”

Carlita hissed something that snared Tara’s attention.

“Dis don’t have nuthin’ to do wit you,” Tara said to Carlita, eyeing the woman with full dislike.

Carlita gave it right back, unabashed and totally letting loose the inner city, project girl she was at heart. They’d both come from the ‘hood, but Carlita could tap back into that inner person faster than a blink of an eye.

“If it involves Ms. Perry, *Tara*, it sure does involve me,” Carlita said, stepping in front of Harper, back straight, and her hands balled into fists. “And our resource officer, which I’ll be more than happy to contact to help you get back to your automobile.”

The grin on Tara’s face grew wider and more malicious.

“Hell, I ain’t here about my boy,” Tara said. “And da police might be what we want here. Being his daddy used to be in the joint.”

Harper frowned. *What?*

SCHOOLED

“What exactly do you want?” Carlita asked, lips in a smirk, all streaks of professionalism gone. No doubt if Tara tried to touch her, Carlita would knock the hell out of her.

Tara leaned in to Harper and the full smack of alcohol slapped Harper’s senses. “I want you to leave my Nate alone,” she said.

“Your Nate?” Harper scoffed, before she caught herself. “I have no idea what you’re talking about?”

Tara’s phlegm-filled and rattled laugh echoed down the hallway. Carlita inched between them and bullied Tara back to a respectable distance.

“You ain’t too smart for a teacher,” she called from around Carlita. “He tell ya about his time in prison? Oh, you ask him about that.”

Harper’s blood became ice. There it was again. The mad woman had come to her job asking about her ex husband. Harper discreetly glanced up and down the hallway. This kind of talk got teachers fired, or worse, transferred.

Tara’s cackling glee solidified Harper’s resolve to remain apathetic—on the surface.

I’m not giving her the satisfaction or the confirmation that Nathaniel and I are—Harper’s chest squeezed upon itself so hard the last word plunged across her consciousness—*lovers*.

“Pardon?” she croaked around the lump of fear lodged in her throat.

“Yeah right. His time on the inside? Ain’t he proud? So proud he told you. ‘Cuz if I did the shit, hell, half the shit he did...”

Tara fell further back, but the leering continued. Wild, with malicious intent practically pouring from her being, she laughed more. Carlita mumbled a warning under her breath. Harper missed it, but Tara didn’t.

“Whenever you think you ready,” Tara told her and then waved her off.

Cheeks flaming in embarrassment beneath her hot skin, Harper conjured her anger. Good. Her fury would burn through her shame and confusion. Harper tucked a stray hair behind her ear and met Tara’s faded eyes, allowing her anger to roll forward. She made no effort to hide it.

"I do not see how Scott's father's history is appropriate for discussion at this time. It doesn't pertain to Scott. He's an active part of his son's life now. Good evening, *Miss Pearson*."

"Leave. Now," Carlita growled, allowing her teacher bag to slip to the floor. "I'm not asking again."

Tara took on a lazy glance at the steaming math teacher and shrugged. "One day your watchdog ain't gonna be able to save ya from me," Tara said casually. "Leave him alone. He's mine."

He isn't yours. He hasn't been yours for a long, long time.

With a dramatic spin, Tara left.

Carlita waited until the scrawny woman had disappeared down corridor before saying, "You don't believe that hogwash, do you?"

Harper nearly burst into a scream. Her heart bleated out a message that escalated her panic to the point her temples pounded. With each word from Tara's mouth, her emotional seams threatened to rip into shreds.

"I don't know," she admitted to herself as much as her co-worker and friend.

"It makes sense though," Carlita said hoisting her teacher bag back onto her shoulder with a groan. "The fact he's been gone for six years without any explanation, and Scott's obvious anger toward him had to be because of something like prison or the secret service." She sniggered and glanced at Harper.

Harper remained silent.

"Joking, kidding, you know," Carlita said. "Listen, let it go. He's all in love with you and he's good people, Harper."

"Good people don't commit crimes that get them locked away for six years," Harper replied without looking at her.

Carlita took the cue and didn't say much as they exited the building. As she crossed to her sedan, she waved goodbye but worry haunted her features.

As Harper reached her own vehicle, she switched on her cell phone. Almost instantly, the *beep, beep* warning of a voicemail message called for her attention.

"It's me," came Nathaniel's rich voice after Harper finished entering her password. "Tara left me a nasty little warning that she was going to see you today. Whatever she tells you, Harper... Never mind. Call me, please."

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The soft croak of “goodbye” stroked her pain. Worry and fear clung to those words, and she knew without doubt Tara had told her the truth. He couldn’t even bring himself to confess his folly on the phone. He had been keeping secrets.

Jail. Prison. God, she’d been such an idiot. She swore and pushed her tears back. Her usual ride home failed to calm her frazzled nerves. She knew without doubt that Tara’s tale had been true. The woman’s swagger and smugness meant certainty.

Why? That nagged at her. Why had he not told her? Shame? Guilt? Pride?

Her heart had been stolen by a criminal.

Her phone buzzed and she leapt. Heart racing, she tried to calm down and reign in the galloping speed.

Nathaniel.

She ignored it, allowing the call to roll to voicemail again.

Without another thought, she shoved the phone back into her purse and shot through the green light with tires squealing. No matter how fast she drove, the pang of disappoint stayed right with her.

Chapter Sixteen

Thursday Evening, 8701-D Elm Street, home of Harper Perry

No one should be allowed to look so damn delectable when they've pissed someone off. Harper sat in her car and allowed herself another lustful look at Nathaniel Pearson who leaned against the driver's side door of his gleaming black truck. Jeans hugged his hardened thighs and cradled his crotch and the thick phallus she'd come to call her joystick. It had brought her immense joy these last weeks, but this news was the sole blip of distress on a chart of great pleasure. The jeans squeezed his tight ass the way her hands had only two nights prior. The amazing blue cotton shirt highlighted his labor-toned physique.

I can't fall for him. I don't date convicts.

Her own body responded at the memories of feeling his hard thighs cushion her ass as she rode her joystick. Her nipples ached as they pebbled, ready for his marvelous mouth and supremely wicked tongue. The man's tongue had the grace of a seasoned ballet dancer and the moves of a Vegas bootie shaker. The man had lips so sinful they wrenched cries and moans from her mouth at will.

So what? He may be sexy, but he's a felon. Smart women know to stay away from felons.

He had no idea how hot he looked when sad and apologetic.

Stop it! He's a liar, a criminal, and God knows what else!

Who knew what he'd done to get put in prison, but whatever it was, wasn't legal. It all pointed to something faulty in his moral compass. How did she miss it? There had to be signs. Harper prided herself on being a good judge of character, but she'd been wrong about Nathaniel Pearson. Prison could've redeemed him. Or made him better at deceiving others...like her.

SCHOOLED

She shook off her internal musings after her mental rebuke. With her panties beyond damp and her emotions swirling like Hurricane Katrina, she adjusted her blouse and got out of the car. Ready to face him. Her determination set, she met his steady gaze with a steely one of her own.

He crossed the parking lot much too fast. He was there in her personal space as if he had a right, as if he belonged there.

“Back up,” she ordered. Her hand swept upward, directing him off of her. His scent wafted over her, drowning her in memories and hormones. Her body instantly responded, and her stomach did a belly roll and clutched hard.

“Yeah, sure,” he conceded, holding his hands up. “Please, hear me out.”

She resented the hell out of the guilt the small comment inspired. She wasn’t so closed minded to think just because he was a felon he was out to maim her or something. She had every right to be mad. Still, even furious, her hunger for him couldn’t be squashed.

Nathaniel’s eyes met hers and remained locked on. Pleading with her to understand, to forgive, but she couldn’t. Harper swallowed the tight emotional knot in her throat, and looked away. Her heart raced, spurred on by his need and her own desire.

“You didn’t tell me. I had to find out from her, of all people,” Harper said, folding her arms over her chest.

“Let me explain, Harper, please,” Nathaniel pleaded. “I know how you feel.”

His outstretched hand grazed her elbow, but failed to secure it. Still, ripples of warmth rushed through her, making her yearn to lean into his embrace. There was no way she was going to allow herself to do that, but the want was still there.

“Oh, you do?” Harper snapped. *How could you possibly know, because if you did, you wouldn’t put me through this shit.*

“Yeah.”

“That can’t be right. Because if you gave a damn about how I feel, you would’ve told me about your little trip.”

His face fell.

Serves him right. Bastard. She blinked back bitter tears, which stung her eyes. Those pearls of pain weren't going to fall. Not where he could see them. *Hell no.*

"I know all about it. Tara gave me quite the earful," she continued, wanting to hurt him as much as his omission had injured her. Let him feel the way she felt in front of his ex-wife.

Nathaniel swore. He ran a punishing hand through his hair, bunched up his fists and growled.

Anger made his skin flush, but Harper held her ground. If he was mad, so be it. He should've told her up front. It wasn't like she went behind his back and dug up information. Damn him. He wasn't the only one running hot.

"I'm sorry! I'm an idiot, but I—"

"You're an idiot, a liar, and a felon," she shouted, not caring who was around.

"Was."

"Was?" She frowned at him. His tone clearly meant he didn't agree with her assessment of him. "Was? Zebras don't change their strips, Mr. Pearson," she said in her best teacher voice. "Those markings are permanent and DNA engrained."

"No, I paid my debt for my stupidity—and then some," he replied, arms crossed defensively over his chest. The solid and serious tone infiltrated his voice. Eyebrows crouched down into a V and his apologetic smile had meld into a thin line of irritation. Nathaniel stood his ground and appeared to have dug in his heels for a verbal battle. "I was framed. Set up by Tara's ex-boyfriend. I am innocent, but was convicted by a jury of people who didn't know any damn better."

"Whatever. Everyone in prison says they're innocent."

"Yeah, but I *was*. I served time anyway. Tara is the last person you want to look for the truth, since she stood by and let me take the fall for her druggie boyfriend."

"I don't care! You lied. End. Of. Story."

"I didn't lie! I care about you. I mean, I *love* you and that's why I didn't tell you," he said, tossing his arms up in exasperation.

"You shouldn't have hidden it from me. That's the point."

"Are you kidding?" Nathaniel scoffed. "You would've gone out with me if I'd told you? Me? A convict? Hell, Harper, I had

to fight for you to go out with me when you knew I was Scott's father!"

She glared at him. "You asked me anyway, and I said yes."

"Yeah, but would that be the same answer if you knew I'd done time?" he asked.

She opened her mouth to say yes, but then she closed it.

"That's what I thought."

"Maybe," she said, lifting her chin higher in defiance. "I might've, but you didn't give me a chance."

"Maybe? Might? I'm crazy about you. I couldn't take a *chance*!" He reached for her, but she flinched, falling back a few steps out of his reach. His eyes widened at her action.

"Don't touch me," she spat, anger firing up once more. "Don't you *ever* touch me!" Though she said the words, her entire being wanted the exact opposite.

"I didn't mean for this to happen, but I'm sorry," the injury plain in his voice. It mirrored her own.

"Really? Well, you lied to me. What did you think that did? The talk of bad food," she continued as realization dawned on her, "back two weeks ago when I cooked for you the first time—that was your chance to set it right."

"I'm sorry, Harper. I didn't want to lose you," he said, putting both hands in his hair and rubbing briskly as if trying to warm up his brain.

"As if you had me in the first place," she sneered, fury forcing her eyes to narrow and her heart to pound.

She spun on her heels and stalked down the parking lot to the elevator. Fighting the urge to run, she became aware that he wasn't following her upstairs to her condo. She couldn't take being alone with him anymore.

The elevator ride up from the parking lot felt like eternity, but finally the *slatch* of the deadbolt allowed her to relax. She dropped her keys, purse, and anger to the hardwood floor. After sinking into the sofa, Harper gave in to her heart's ache. Tears flooded her resistance and spilled over, coursing down her cheeks like a waterfall.

What was she going to do?

She loved him. Him! The great smile, warm personality, and passionate lover, Nathaniel had been all she wanted in a

man. He worked, took care of himself, and had his own home and vehicle. In today's world, a woman couldn't ask for much more than that, but the one thing she hadn't wanted was his background.

A criminal.

He used to be a prisoner! All sorts of lewd images from pop culture and horror films shot through her. Was he gang raped? Tortured? HIV positive?

"God!" Nausea swished around in her belly. Harper curled into a human ball and wept. How could she not have known? She'd been so blinded by her horniness, she'd been sideswiped. Where the hell did she think he was for all those years?

"I'm an idiot."

She dissolved into despair.

Chapter Seventeen

Nathaniel stared at the closed metallic doors of the elevator as if he meant to burn right through them. The woman of his dreams had vanished behind those doors, and every cell in his body demanded he follow, but his heart warned him not to follow the instincts pounding through him. Instead, he forced himself to return to his truck.

Pushing her wouldn't work. She'd only dig in her heels and raise the wall she kept around her heart even higher. The cool professional demeanor she showed everyone hinted at the tight control she kept on her heart, her emotions. Working with students and parents warranted nothing less, he could imagine.

As the truck rumbled to life, he backed out of the parking space, did a U-turn, and exited the garage. He turned the CD player on and the falsetto heartbreak of Robin Thicke poured from the surround sound speakers. The air conditioning rushed through his ears, caressed his face, but he felt icy cold, achy. Deeper than the air-conditioning, this frigidness burrowing into his bones. Chills zipped up and down his spine at the thought Harper didn't want him.

He turned off the a/c. His eyes burned from lack of sleep—night after night of lying in bed, balled in a tight knot thinking about Harper. And the fear gnawing gleefully at his insides kept him from slumber. Two nights ago seemed like two damn years, and his chest ached at the thought of never seeing it through. Even now, his stomach quivered like a bucket of worms wiggling around in anxious frenzy.

He pulled into the parking lot outside his apartment. He couldn't bring himself to look at the passenger side of his truck. Vacant now, but a couple of days ago, his life, Harper, sat in the seat, legs crossed delicately at the ankles, dressed in black slacks and crimson sweater for their dinner date. So beautiful, she'd

stolen his very breath, and made his heart hammer as hard as his cock would later that evening when he successfully unclothed her and exposed her true beauty.

What the hell was he going to do? He couldn't breathe without her. He shuddered again, despite the cozy warmth his apartment provided. No, the chill came from a lack of warmth his sun once bestowed. Now it seemed only shadows clouded his face, and without the constant heat she inspired inside him, Nathaniel felt very much like the empty shell of the man that spent six years in prison.

He hungered to have Harper's liquid heat, her sunny joy back in his life—he would lay his heart, his purpose, and his soul bare. Scary, if she rejected it, him, well he wasn't going to think about it.

Even still his stomach burned at the thought and the terror that possibility raised. "No," he growled to the apartment and plopped down on the sofa. "No, I'm going to get her back. No matter what it takes."

He took out his cell phone, not bothering with the lights, the thermostat, or even to shut his front door. His mind zeroed in on Harper and the dilemma of getting her back in his arms. Little else mattered, say for Scott.

The first step to winning her back had to be in giving her the truth. Yes, he tried it in the parking lot, but Harper couldn't really hear anything he said. Not really. So emotionally injured and raw, she rebuffed his every word, smacking his verbal defense down with deadly accuracy. Already assembling the wall around her heart, to protect herself, Harper backed out of reach. She heard him, but she didn't really hear.

If he could prove he had been framed, then she'd know he was telling the truth. She might be able to place her trust in him again, and if he could harness her trust, her heart would surely follow.

He grimaced in the shadowy gloom. If he'd been able to prove his innocence to begin with, he wouldn't have given away six years of his life. And risked losing the best thing that had ever happened to him—Harper.

SCHOOLED

Except for Scott, Harper consumed his entire being. He was a broken, barren man, but Harper had been his oasis, providing nourishment both physically and emotionally.

He sighed. "Your home isn't here."

And truth was, Harper felt like home, a place he belonged when in her arms, nestled inside her, or spooned against her soft glorious globes on the one time she spent the night. He couldn't, *wouldn't* live without her.

Truth. If he could prove himself innocent, she'd see him as less a convict and more of a man—a man she could trust, love. So who knew the truth and could vouch for him?

Tara.

His eyes flipped open. The grim smile on his face widened as a plan took root. Yeah. Tara.

Six years ago she wouldn't stand up and testify that the drugs belonged to her boyfriend, but she was overdue for an overdose of truth. Would she be willing to confess her role in Nathaniel's set-up and tell the truth now?

He sat upright on the sofa and balled his hands into fists. He'd make sure she did.

Without waiting, he picked up the phone and dialed her number. She'd answer his call, because she wanted to rub it in that she wrecked his relationship with Harper. No voicemails for Tara. Nope. She'd want her fifteen seconds of taunting and to inhale his misery.

She had another thing coming.

Sure enough the first buzz hadn't died before Tara's smoked ravaged voice coughed out a "Yeah?"

"Hello, Tara," he said, not allowing the flash of fury to show in his voice.

He wanted to make her pay for putting Harper through such torment, and she would. Tara wouldn't come out clean again. Nope. She'd pay for what she did to Harper. He'd never wanted to hit a woman, ever, but Tara had strayed so far from fighting fair it wasn't funny. Still, he had to keep a lid on his emotions. Because despite her minor success at sending Harper into hysterics, little did she know she was going to be the instrument for getting Harper to come back to him.

Laughter. Evil laughter met his greeting.

“What’s so funny?” he asked as if he didn’t know. Pacing around the living room, he listened and forced himself to think about the end goal: Harper. Deals with the devil had a way of biting back, but he didn’t give a damn about the risk. He had to make sure Harper understood he wasn’t a criminal, but an innocent used and mishandled by the woman who swore to honor and cherish him.

“You actin’ all like you dunno nuthin’,” Tara said, a bit of a slur blurring the words into one long string of hate. “That black bitch leave you, didn’t she? Ain’t no criminal good enough for her educated ass. You ready to come on home?”

Nathaniel blew out an angry sigh. “No.”

“No?” The merriment floating around her tone fell sharply. “Whatcha mean *no*?”

“I mean, I’m not ready to come home,” Nathaniel said firmly. He made himself relax his grip on the cell phone. Already his knuckles hurt from gripping it so hard. “Har—uh—Ms. Perry and I weren’t an item. That’s not why I called.”

Silence. That threw her for a loop. Good. Tara off-balanced played to his benefit.

She thought she’d done something wonderful in destroying him and Harper, but she never had real confirmation about their relationship. No way on God’s green Earth would Harper confirm for the parent of one of her students that they were an item. The woman’s profession weighed heavy in her life, so he knew Tara had been shooting in the dark when she told Harper about his prison record.

“I want to talk to you, in person,” he said lightly. “I got a call from Detective Brown.”

“Detective...” Tara stammered, the mocking glee from earlier had been transformed into a terrorized whisper. “Brown?” Good. She remembered him.

“Yes, he gave me a call and I need to discuss it with you.”

“Why? Reggie’s dead.”

“That’s exactly the point.”

Tara’s raspy, phlegm-filled breathing filled the void. He could envision her drug-soaked brain struggling to comprehend what he implied. She wouldn’t be able to see this one coming, because the entire thing had just hatched in his brain.

SCHOOLED

“Whatcha want talk ‘bout?” she barked at last, and her anger was music to Nathaniel’s ears.

“Yes, about that,” he said with a grin. “I want to meet with you and tell you, but not over the cell phone like this when anyone can pick up what I’m saying.”

“Yeah, dat true. Tomorrow when you come to git Scott.”

“Fine. But this is important, Tara, so try to be sober.”

“Fuck you,” she snapped and disconnected the call.

“Thank you,” he replied with a satisfied smile. Tomorrow he’d pick up Scott and have that little conversation with Tara. Plenty of time to get the supplies he required, and to place one more call.

He scrolled through his contact list and highlighted Detective Brown’s name. With a deep breath he pressed the send button. If this didn’t work, he didn’t know what would.

He had to try. Risky? Yes.

Harper was worth his 100% effort and he’d try everything until his last breath to land her in his arms once more.

“Greensboro Police Department, VICE,” the deep tenor answered.

“I need to speak to Detective Brown.”

Chapter Eighteen

Friday Afternoon, James Tennison Middle School

Harper closed her puffy eyes and swallowed the ache permeating her sore throat. Despite the time the day had crawled sluggishly by, and her students, especially Scott, had behaved as if Thanksgiving break was today. Her body groaned with fatigue as she lowered it into her chair. She slowly opened her eyes and sighed. Though she slept last night, it'd been rough going. Twisting and turning most of the night, the sheets confessed to her tortured slumber.

"TGIF," Carlita sang, sailing into her room with the clicking of black patent-leather heels and the scented swirl of Elizabeth Taylor's *Passion*. She stalked in like she owned the place. Her scarlet red dress fit like a glove and the oversized patent-leather black belt wrapped around her narrow waist.

Harper grinned despite the ache spreading throughout her person. She hadn't felt like smiling all day and Carlita's entrance bought the first authentic smile in the last twenty-four hours.

"Yes," Harper conceded. Had the day been Monday, she would've surely called in sick tomorrow. Her heart felt as if she'd been racked over the coals and gutted. "Thank goodness it's Friday."

Carlita crossed the sea of desks and tables to stand in front of her desk. "Damn girl. You look hell ravished."

"Thanks," Harper said dryly, busying herself with straightening her desk. "You mentioned that this morning."

Carlita laughed and then her eyes became serious. "You really shouldn't let that crackhead get in your head."

"I don't—"

SCHOOLED

“Care?” Carlita interrupted. “Yeah, you do. You wouldn’t have been bawling your pretty brown eyes out all night if you didn’t. So don’t lie to me. We’ve been friends for too long.”

“What do you want?”

“I want you to take a chance on love,” Carlita said grabbing one of the student chairs and moving it right in front of Harper’s desk. “Really, trust love this time. You took Tara’s word at face value, and you and I both know she ain’t about shit. You believed it.”

Harper put both hands on her desk, palms down and rose from her chair. Steadying herself, she made herself meet Carlita’s eyes. “He confirmed it.”

“What?” Carlita said, scarlet-painted mouth opened in a round, surprised O.

“He said he did time. Told me yesterday, so don’t be all over me about Tara. She wasn’t lying.”

Carlita swallowed and dropped her gaze from Harper. It shouldn’t have pleased Harper, but it did. She had every right to be upset with Nathaniel, and she intended to be mad and hurt for as long as she damn well wanted.

“So, it means nothing,” Carlita said, recovering from her misstep. “I’ve seen that man’s eyes on you, Harper. He loves you, truly, deeply, and crazy-ass gaga over you. And I don’t mean the lust-inspired longings of a man locked up for years. I’m talking about that love, the kind that could last decades, and even until death.”

Harper gaped at her friend. What the hell would Carlita know of love lasting until death? The woman had been divorced three times and even the current boyfriend, Tom, was on the chopping block. Commitment had no entry in Carlita’s dictionary, so why was she lecturing her?

“I see that look,” Carlita said, eyes downcast, and suddenly sad. “You think I’m just spitting theory, don’t you? See, you’d be wrong about that.”

Harper eased herself back down into the seat, feeling a confession on the horizon.

“I know the look in Nathaniel’s eyes because Tony had that same look for me,” Carlita said nearly so low, Harper had to lean forward to hear it. “He was my true love, but I was stupid.

Looking only at what he didn't have. The man didn't have a pot to piss in. No college education, no sweet car, and no extra money to lavish on me. And you know me, Harp. It's all about me. He didn't have deep pockets, but he had a good heart. Something you can't put a price tag or a dollar value on. I didn't care that his heart was true, his love for me unwavering. I only saw the physical, the materialistic, and the frowned-up disappointed faces of my family. I focused more on what people wanted for me, not what I wanted for myself. Everyone told me Tony was beneath me, not up to my standards. When in reality, he wasn't up to *their* standards. I let those standards roll over me and I lost him. Well, I threw him away and sought what everyone told me was *better*."

Harper had never heard Carlita talk about Tony. This story was new, and from the pained expression wrinkling Carlita's mouth, an excruciating one. Eyes shiny with unshed tears, Carlita met her questioning gaze. She didn't dare cry in front of Harper. No, too tough for that, Carlita wouldn't allow the pain to leak too much from the tight lid she kept it under.

Harper's heart reached out to her even as she sat rigid in her chair. Carlita had shared this with her. It stunned her to see her strong, bulldog of a friend harbor so much hurt and regret.

"So don't, Harper, let him get away from you. Better, don't throw him away. You will never get that chance again. Ever. Every story has two sides. You only heard the cracked-out side from Tara."

"I heard his side too," Harper shot back, too fast and much too hard.

Carlita flinched. "Yeah, but I wondered if you actually listened."

"He said he was innocent," Harper said, blowing out her feelings' turmoil. "Innocent men don't serve time."

Carlita snorted. "Are you black? Of course, innocent men serve time. What else did he say?"

"Yes, I'm black." Harper sighed before continuing, "But Nathaniel is not. They don't lock up white folks without a lot of reason."

Carlita sucked her teeth and folded her arms over her chest. "You didn't listen to that boy at all," Carlita replied, shaking her head.

Harper reviewed her behavior dozens of times last night, and no, she hadn't listened to him at all. She heard every word, but her fears hastily ravished any attempts to logically understand why he would lie to her.

"Maybe you ought to call him now that you're a little calmer," Carlita suggested as she adjusted her belt and stood up. She slid the chair back to its matching desk and put her hands on her hips. Tossing her head back, she looked every bit the stern schoolteacher of old, and that posture meant Harper was about to be given a task.

"Carlita..." She *so* didn't get it. This wasn't a small matter. The man was a convicted felon and she was a teacher, for crying out loud. Never mind the damaged trust.

"What are you going to do, Harper?" Carlita asked. The injured woman who mourned the loss of her true love had been carefully tucked back into the internal abyss she kept him. "Let love pass or go grab some ass?"

Harper burst into laughter. "Did you exhaust all that wisdom and now it's back to 'hood-isms?"

Carlita shrugged. "Life breeds its own wisdom, as you well know."

Harper smiled, but deep down she had no idea what she was going to do about Nathaniel.

Carlita shook her head as she strolled out of the classroom, back as straight, make-up as perfect as when she came in. Though she seemed like the same woman on the outside, Carlita had been changed by Harper's relationship with Nathaniel.

And that weighed heavily on Harper. If being with Nathaniel had managed to spiral through Carlita's hardened outer shell and invoke such poignant emotions, well, then maybe Harper had overlooked something.

She sighed, leaned her elbows on her desk, and dropped her head into her open palms. She missed him. Missed his capable, construction-hardened arms wrapped tightly around her, making her feel safe. Those delicious moist lips she loved to nibble, to lick and to suck. The sensual aroma of masculinity he wore like

a cologne saturated her sheets. And Carlita wondered why she couldn't sleep last night. Every inhaled breath brought Nathaniel close to her.

Body blaring its hunger at levels so hot she broke out in a sweat, Harper lifted up her teacher bag, her purse, and got to her feet. Nathaniel's omission had seemed like sacrilege, but maybe Carlita was right. There were two sides to every story and she'd only listened to Tara's. Truth was that when Nathaniel had produced his version, she'd been so angry her heart had hardened, protecting itself from further emotional damage.

Bastard. He'd been a bastard to put her in this situation. He should've been honest and upfront. *You'd never have given him a chance had you known, and you know it.*

Shaking her head to clear the cobwebs, Harper shoved all thoughts concerning Nathaniel to the back of her mind and attempted to think about next week's lesson planning. Not that he would stay there. No sooner had she reached her sleek car, than thoughts of the man came seeping forward again.

"Damn him!"

"Would that be me you're cursing about?" came the long caressing stroke of Nathaniel's voice against the back of her neck, forcing all points in her body to tighten in wet desire.

"Nathaniel," she breathed, spinning around to face him.

"Yes," he said, a wry grin spread across his face as if he knew that her clit was pulsating without fail, beating out its hunger as if ignited and powered by the Energizer Bunny. "Me. I miss you, Harper."

Tousled honey-brown framed the beautiful face that tossed her the wry grin. He looked yummy.

Mouth dry, she had to swallow several times before she had enough saliva to produce a word. "What..."

"Am I doing here?" he finished.

He stepped all into her personal space, engulfing her in his scent and she closed her eyes and moaned as the hairs on her neck rose. Inhaling him, she sighed, but then caught herself.

"Yes! Explain yourself. I am leaving my job," she said, adjusting the teacher bag on her shoulder. "I don't have time for this."

SCHOOLED

Quaking inside, Harper turned her back to him. Though she put her back to him to force him to back up, the damn man stepped closer. His breath hot on the back of her neck, forced her nipples to tighten so stiff peaks.

“You don’t have time for us, Harper?” he asked, and it wasn’t a question. “I’ve got something you’re going to want to hear.”

Harper closed her eyes. Did he not get it?

“The question is, am I really going to want to hear it?” she asked, keeping her back to him. She could see his reflection in the window’s reflection. His face seemed calm.

His voice lowered, spilling goose bumps across her flesh. “I’m here because you are my morning sun, my evening moon, and my afternoon delight. I am nothing but a shell without your love to fill me, make me alive, and make me whole. God, Harper, you are my world, and I am forever drawn to you, linked to you. You anchor me. Harper, I *love* you!”

Knees weakened, she spun around completely unaware that her purse and her teacher bag had slide to the ground. He closed the small distance between them, not an inch of light could part them. He shoved his hand into her hair and lifted her face to his. She met his gaze, and trembled at the hot flashes of love she found there. Her heart shot up to her throat.

My God, what would I do without you, Nathaniel?

“I love you, Harper, and nothing is going to keep me from you,” he said, nose nearly bumping hers. “Do you understand?”

He wasn’t serious. Was he?

Chapter Nineteen

It took every bit of resolve not to latch onto her deliciously plump lips and tongue-fuck her mouth until she melted in a puddle of need right in front of him.

But the distant jingle of keys from a custodian forced him to reel himself and his hormones back in. She worked here, and if anyone saw them, Harper would have some explaining to do. He'd already cost her so much drama, that to add to his tally would be more than he could bear.

So, Nathaniel steadied himself and released her hair, allowing the silky brunette strands to glide through his fingers, like spring water, cool and exciting. He sighed, and tried again.

"Please answer me, baby."

Her lips quivered a bit, and she bit her lower lip between her gorgeous white teeth as if to quell whatever emotion rode her heart. Those eyes met his and he nearly dropped to his knees right then and there. All the air gushed from his lungs and he closed his eyes.

Tears. Shiny, unshed, and bright tears had found refuge in her eyes.

"Give me a chance, Harper," he begged releasing her, stepping back from her and fighting the urge to snatch her into his arms and kiss those tears away. Did what he say really make her so sad? He didn't want to make her unhappy.

"I didn't mean to hurt you," he said, shoving his hands into his pockets to keep from touching her. "I didn't come here to bother you. If you want me to go, tell me."

Harper had crossed her hands over her chest as if hugging herself. The temperature had dropped a bit and her breath escaped in puffs of fog. She blinked and those tears spilled over, racing down her cheeks, but she made no move to wipe them.

“Just tell me what you think you’re doing?” she asked, harsh and unforgiving.

Not what he had hoped to hear. Didn’t she see how her body reacted to him? Did the two weeks of intense love making, movies, dinners and afternoons in the park not lend itself to how compatible they were?

“I came to tell you that I love you—”

“Which you did,” Harper interrupted ruthlessly. “I’m late for, for a date. So hurry up.”

A date?

“Who...uh,” he stammered, stifling a demand and focusing on the point of him coming here. “I told you yesterday I was innocent.”

Harper sighed noisily but he pressed on. “And I have proof, in Tara’s own words that I wasn’t guilty.” He fished in his pocket and waved a mini recorder.

“Weren’t you the same person yesterday who was telling me that the last person I should listen to for the truth is Tara?” Harper asked, hands now down at her side in balled-up fists. “Now you bring me a tape of her saying exactly what you wanted her to say. Convenient, isn’t it? What did you promise her? A hit?”

Nathaniel eyebrows shot up. “If you’d give me a damn minute, I’d tell the other part,” he said, swearing at his clumsy attempt to repair this. Harper remained injured, mistrustful and suspicious. He had to go ahead with what he started. “I knew Tara’s words wouldn’t be enough for you, especially after what I said yesterday. So, I contacted Detective Brown, the same man who arrested me. Today, Tara is under arrest. Her confession that she lied under oath and her recent drug use helped them place the silver bracelets on her. The statutes may not remain on my case, but her drug use is enough to give her a hard slap on the wrist and hopefully rehab. It also gives me full custody of Scott.”

Harper’s mouth closed. Whatever she was about to say, Nathaniel would never hear it. “Really?”

“Yes. I have her on tape, but she didn’t say those things to me. She confessed to Detective Brown, and I have a copy. She told him how satisfied she was to see my, and I quote, ‘high and mighty ass,’ end quote, be taken away in handcuffs. Oh, you

know Tara, she's only telling the truth when she's knows it'll hurt others. So, it gave her great joy to rub my face in her betrayal. So here."

He extended it out to Harper, a clear offering.

"It's all here. It's not digital. You can't say I fiddled with it at all." She stared at the miniature cassette as if it had suddenly grown wings and was levitating. "Harper, I meant what I said. I *was* innocent. And I meant that I love you."

He couldn't help himself. He reached for and pulled her close. She let him take her and allowed him to wrap his arms around her. With the cassette in her hand, she allowed him to hug her tight to him.

"Give me a chance. Give *us* a chance," he cooed into the top of her head. He could feel her quivering. Wrestling with herself maybe? "Please, Harper. You can't deny what you feel is right. And baby, we're right together."

Harper groaned. She lifted her head and as her eyes met his, he found them free of anger, free of suspicion, but still full of questions.

"I stand corrected, Ms. Perry."

"As do I, Mr. Pearson," she said, looking at the tape cassette nestled in the palm of her hand, very much like his heart. "As do I."

* * * *

Harper held the same fears and frustrations as other women. Sure, she had passed what some would consider young, but she certainly couldn't hang her hat on the old crowd either. Somewhere in the vast chasm between a large crush of people those inadequate labeling couldn't help but render them in the vaguest of terms middle-aged.

So as she stood there in the cozy cocoon of Nathaniel's arms, Harper realized how close she'd come to losing him. This felt right. Yes, this was very right and she'd been very wrong. The cassette's hard plastic edges bit into her palm, and she realized she didn't need to listen to it anyway. She loved him and she should've listened to him.

SCHOOLED

Her heart throbbed as his hand caressed her back, and even through her coat, the warmth spread down to her toes and up to the roots of her hair. The smile etched itself across her face and didn't stop there, her entire being was buzzing with an energy she hadn't ever experienced before.

"Nathaniel," she said, "I'm sorry."

"Oh?" He placed a light kiss on her cheek that sent a tingle to her core.

"My stubborn streak is as broad as an elephant," she said, feeling her still damply frozen cheeks blush. "I let my fear and Tara taint my view of you. I love you. Forgive me."

"There's nothing to forgive," he said with an earnest look. "I should have been honest with you at the first possible moment, and I swear I'll always be honest with you."

"That means the world to me, Nathan, but still I should have listened," she insisted, and she would have said more had he not covered her apology with a deep kiss.

"Let's go to my place," he breathed as he pulled away and gazed into her eyes. "It's closest, and we need privacy to continue this apology."

Epilogue

Summer, Bur Mill Park

A hand clapped Harper on the shoulder and she jumped forward in her seat.

“Relax, baby,” Nathaniel’s croon caressed her exposed neck. “I’m back with ice cream. Now who had the chocolate chip?”

“Duh, me,” Scott called out from the end of the picnic table. “You and her got those lame flavors. Vanilla and chocolate. Ha, ha.”

Nathaniel smiled as he passed the cup to Harper.

“Nothing funny about it,” he said, winking at Scott. “I liked chocolate before I met her. And I’m sure she’s always been a fan of vanilla.”

She simply nodded and was rewarded with one of Nathaniel’s charming smiles. Each time he grinned like that, her mouth went dry and her heart fled into her throat. It burned from the intense love that shined from his handsome face. Free and full of life, the little shadows that once haunted her lover were gone. Those gloomy pockets of pain and hurt had been chased from Scott, also, as much as could be for a teenager.

The fabric of the sky stretched outward in sunny cornflower blue. Picture perfect as if on a postcard, and Harper sighed in pure contentment. To think she almost let it all go by her. She held it in her hands and she nearly threw him out with the garbage.

“Dad, I’m going over to the statue of General Greene. That all right?” Scott asked, palms flat on the table, but he didn’t move. Not until he got permission from Nathaniel. Their dynamics came from months of fierce therapy and challenges, but they were making headway.

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“Sure.”

Scott bounced up from the table and, taking his iPod and heading toward the famous general.

“Why you smiling like that?” Nathaniel asked, sitting down beside her on the picnic table, one leg through over each side of the seat.

He scooted up to her. The knuckles on his hand brushed across the side of her jaw. Automatically her eyes closed and relished his touch. When she opened her eyes, she met his intense bluish green ones. He placed his hand at the small of her back, instantly making her clit throb and chills scurry across her body.

“I’m happy,” she said. The giggle blossomed in her belly and spilled from her lips. *Wow. I am actually really, really happy.*

“Good. Me too,” he said, and then kissed her lightly on the mouth.

She spied Scott quickly turn back to the statue of Greene.

Nathaniel followed her gaze. “Give him time, Harper,” he said. “He likes you, though.”

“He’s a teenager. He doesn’t like anyone.”

Nathaniel grinned and conceded the truth with a playful shrug. “But I like you.” He took her hand in his. “Love you a lot.”

“And I love you,” she said, leaning down to nuzzle her nose against his. “Let’s leave the past behind us and look toward our future together.”

“Yes ma’am.”

About the Author

RaeLynn loves nothing more than long, hot baths, snuggling in front of crackling fires and sleeping in late on Sundays. She writes books that aren't your run of the mill romance with sex under the covers and with the lights out—they're sensual and erotica romance. And that means lust, passion, and a whole lot of sex. Are you ready to join her on her latest fantasy? Out here in the west, imaginations run wild, and entertainment knows no bounds.