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DANIELLE

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THE DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH

IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE DEGREE OF BACHELOR OF ARTS

BY

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ABSTRACT

DANIELLE

BY JADE LACY

Danielle is a novella that explores the intense connection between a high school senior, Juno, and her teacher, Danielle Ohara, at a competitive Silicon Valley high school. Though their relationship remains an unconsummated friendship, their intimacy sends waves through their lives and the lives of those around them. Juno begins her senior year as an unknown nerd, but through her relationship with Danielle she gains admirers, popularity, and a profound connection unlike any she's experienced before. Danielle's identity as a lesbian also raises new questions of sexuality for Juno. However, the two are torn apart when other perspectives—a student who voices her disapproval of teacher-student friendships in the school newspaper, and another teacher who has a sexual relationship with his former student—force them to confront the appearance and impact of their dynamic.

This novella takes place in 2018, after the MeToo movement had shone a light on the problematic nature of unequal power dynamics in sexual relationships. In this era, teacher-student relationships were widely viewed as problematic, even when the age of consent was not an issue; however, the boundaries of unconsummated relationships were and are still being negotiated. In top high schools where parents pay high tuition or property taxes to give their children an elite education, academic pressure often pushes vulnerable students to their teachers for comfort and validation. *Danielle* explores the boundaries of what is and is not appropriate at one of these high schools through Juno's experiences with Danielle in her senior year.

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CHAPTER ONE

Ari was the one who introduced me to Ms. Ohara. It was the very end of junior year, when AP exams were over and classes devolved into a free period. We were sitting in history trying to balance our chairs on the back legs while Mr. Lopez played Mario Kart with some boys in the corner.

“You know what we should do?” Ari said.

“I don’t want to go to Starbucks.” Ari had been begging me to grab coffee with him during history. We were only allowed to leave campus at lunch, but Ari insisted that no one would care if we broke the rules. Our high school was ultra-competitive, nestled in Silicon Valley with big tech headquarters just steps away, dangling success over our heads. One upside to our school was that high achievers got less discipline. Between Ari’s lead roles in every theater production and my 4.0, we were basically invincible. Still, my heart started beating fast every time I walked outside the gates while class was in session.

“Not Starbucks,” he said. “Let’s go to Ms. Ohara’s room.”

“Huh?”

“She’s one of the English teachers.”

“I know who she is.” Ms. Ohara was one of the younger, popular teachers. All of Ari’s friends in the drama department idolized her, but neither Ari nor I had ever been in her class.

“Why bother her?”

“Beth’s in there right now.”

“Beth is your friend, not mine.” I’d actually met Beth a few times, when Ari convinced me to hang out with his theater friends, but it was awkward. She was too nice and not quite smart enough for me.

“She thinks you’re badass. And Ms. Ohara wants to meet you.”

“How does she even know who I am?”

“I’ve mentioned you a few times. Just come.”

“No thanks, I’ve got business here,” I said, tipping my chair further back on its rear legs.

“This is why you have no friends. Are you going to sit alone in the back of class and study for finals even though you know you’re getting an A?”

That was exactly what I’d planned to do. “No.”

“I promise you’ll like her. She’s not like a teacher, she’s more like a... boss bitch who doesn’t take shit from anyone.”

“Geez.” Ari loved to exaggerate.

“Beth says they get lunch together sometimes just for fun. Isn’t that cool?”

“Not really,” I said. “I don’t feel the urge to hang out with my teachers. That’s kind of weird, isn’t it?”

“You won’t think it’s weird once you meet her. Please?”

I rolled my eyes. Sometimes it was easier to go along with what Ari wanted than to argue with him. “Fine.”

Ari jumped up and pulled me out of the room. Mr. Lopez didn't even look up as we left.

Ari walked a couple steps ahead of me down the hall. His hair was getting long, and the tower of loose curls bounced with every step. He gave a small wave to someone in a classroom. He liked to show off that he could walk the halls without being questioned.

Ari was my only friend. We'd been close since sixth grade. When we first met, he was the scared one and I was the social butterfly, but somewhere in the last few years our dynamic had flipped. He'd found theater, and with it, friends. He blossomed into someone new—louder, and desperate for attention. I didn't share his need for approval. I kept to myself and focused on school. I could expand my horizons in college. For now, I was stuck in the tight, lonely cage of high school.

I hung back in the doorway of Ms. Ohara's room while Ari charged in. It was a lively classroom—each wall plastered with student projects and posters—but it wasn't a colorful mess like most rooms. Ms. Ohara had style.

Beth was on a loveseat in the corner of the room. Ari made a beeline for her and they shared an awkward sitting to standing hug. Ms. Ohara was behind her desk, hidden from view by a frosted plastic pane that sat along the front of the desk. She stood, rising above the divider. She was definitely young—her skin had a glow to it and no wrinkles. She was clearly Eurasian, with the same round face and mousey brown hair as me. I was Chinese and she, I guessed from her last name, was Japanese, but the whiteness drained that distinction out of us at first glance. She could've been my sister.

“Juno. It's great to finally meet you. I've heard so much about you.”

“Oh no,” I said. “Has Ari been telling you stories?”

“Not just him.” Before I could ask who else had been talking about me, she turned to Ari. “Actually Ari, can you do me a favor? I need to return some books to Mrs. Lewis. It’s a two-person job.” She gestured to a desk piled high with copies of *To Kill a Mockingbird*. Beth was already heading for one of the stacks, accepting on Ari’s behalf. He shot me an annoyed glance, then took his own handful of books. As they went out, Ms. Ohara curled one finger at me: *come here*.

I ended up alone with Ms. Ohara before I even had time to process what was happening. Ari was right—being around her felt more normal than I expected.

“Are you hungry?” she asked.

“A little.”

She walked behind her desk and produced a bowl of instant noodles. The fancy kind you could only get at an Asian grocery store, not Top Ramen. “This okay?” she asked. I nodded. Ms. Ohara kept talking as she poured steaming water in from a kettle.

“Did you know I was supposed to have you this year?”

“No.”

“It was a shame. I was looking forward to it. When the rosters came out Ms. Murphy emailed me with a glowing review for you, but then the office said you got moved up a level in math or something and had to be switched out.”

“What did Ms. Murphy say?” She was my freshman year English teacher. One day, out of the blue, I found out she’d given me an award. Best English student in my grade. There was a big ceremony with a speech from each teacher who nominated someone. Afterwards, my mom laughed at me because all the other teachers had personal stories about their students, and Ms. Murphy just talked about how good my essays were. We had never really been close.

“She loves you. She said that you’re insightful, bold on paper, and you only raise your hand when you’ve got something very smart to say. She showed me something you wrote.”

“The *Romeo and Juliet* essay?” That was the one she’d mentioned at the award night. I cringed thinking about it now.

“No, the letter we make all the freshmen write to an author. Yours was about *Flowers for Algernon*—you said,” here she put on a high-sounding voice, “I connected with Charlie Gordon because the smarter he gets the less he respects the people around him.”

I’d forgotten about that letter; it was such a small assignment. I didn’t know if I felt honored or creeped out that Ms. Murphy had remembered it. “I was a pretentious fourteen-year-old.”

“Do you know why she showed it to me?”

“To embarrass me?” Ms. Ohara let out a short laugh.

“To warn me. Your respect must be earned.” She grabbed the bowl from where it had been stewing on her desk and placed it in front of me. “Try it.” Steam puffed in my face as I pulled back the paper top. The noodles were spongy and thick and left a sharp spice in the back of my throat.

“It’s delicious.”

“I’ve got a whole stash. Don’t tell my students.” She watched me slurp up a thick forkful of noodles. “So, what has Ari said about me?”

He’d called her a boss bitch, but I couldn’t exactly say that. “He thinks you’re a good teacher.”

“You’re lying.”

I nearly choked on a noodle. “Sorry?”

“Why would Ari say that? He’s never been my student.” She didn’t sound mad, but she didn’t seem to be joking either. I wasn’t sure what to do. A teacher had never challenged me like this before.

“Maybe he heard it from someone else.”

“Are you implying that there are rumors being spread about me? That’s pretty serious.”

“No, no.” I didn’t know how I dug myself so deep so quick. “He’s only said good things. The way he says it is just a little…”

“Ah.” Ms. Ohara smiled. “Did he call me a… what was it? A boss bitch?” I couldn’t help but laugh hearing her say it herself.

“Yeah, he did.”

“He called me that to my face, so you don’t need to protect him. Ari’s lucky. I would’ve sent him to the office if I were his actual teacher.” She shook her head, amused. “He also said you were a boss bitch. That was the second sparkling endorsement I heard for you. I just had to see if the real thing lives up to the hype.”

I shifted in my seat. I wasn’t used to hearing praise for myself that wasn’t about school. “I don’t know if I can do much to prove myself in half a period.”

“Well, I would be honored if you gave me the chance to get to know you more then. You seem like a special girl.”

“Okay,” I said, smiling. The phrase ‘special girl’ bounced around my head for hours. The next day, when Ari asked me to ditch history and go to Ms. Ohara’s room again, I didn’t hesitate for a second.

* * *

One day when we were hanging out in Ms. Ohara’s room, Beth burst inside.

“I got it,” she said, breathless. Ms. Ohara’s eyes went wide and she ran to embrace Beth. They gripped each other, swaying slightly, for a long time.

“I knew you could do it,” Ms. Ohara whispered into Beth’s hair.

Beth was chosen to be the student speaker at graduation out of the entire senior class. It was the last honor someone could earn before they left the school forever.

Beth and Ms. Ohara started working on the speech together the next day. Ms. Ohara encouraged Ari and I to stick around while they practiced. “An audience helps,” she said.

Beth performed her speech for the three of us, lined up like a jury. Her voice rang out strong and clear. “Today marks the last day we exist as a family. From here, we will separate to find our own way...” She continued on, waxing poetic about the precious nature of the current moment. At the end, Ari was the only one who burst into applause. I waited for Ms. Ohara’s cue. She was very still.

“Beth.” She took a long pause. “It’s bullshit.” I stiffened. I’d only known Ms. Ohara for three weeks. It still shocked me when she was brutally honest with students. “It could’ve been written by anyone. Everyone’s going to fall asleep in the stands.”

“I thought the selection committee would like it,” Beth said quietly.

“Well, they did, but it’s boring. You need to start over. Write something honest.”

“Won’t they be mad if I change the speech?”

“Yes. But not if it’s good enough.” Ms. Ohara pulled the speech out of Beth’s hand and crumpled it. If I was Beth, I would’ve been furious. Ari wasn’t even under fire, but he looked like he was on the brink of tears. Somehow though, Beth laughed as she watched her balled-up speech fly into the trash. She trusted Ms. Ohara completely.

Beth began her second draft with “this school was founded in 1958” and Ms. Ohara didn’t let her read another word. Ari bailed on these rehearsals after that session. They were too intense for him, but Ms. Ohara’s honesty and Beth’s resilience were fascinating to me. Watching them rework the speech became an obsession.

After the first three drafts failed, Ms. Ohara got more serious with Beth. They spent a whole lunch period writing out the highs and lows of her high school career. They seemed to forget about me sitting in the corner. Beth divulged some serious stuff to Ms. Ohara, and from what I could tell it wasn’t their first time talking about it.

There was only a week left until graduation by the time Ms. Ohara finally approved Beth’s speech. It lacked the fanfare of her previous drafts.

“I’m sorry everyone, but I’d like to speak to one person today,” Beth began. It was less of a speech and more of a public apology to her best friend from sophomore year. I overheard Beth say she was almost suspended for what she’d posted about the girl on Instagram, but instead of talking about the fight in her speech, Beth confessed how much she’d rooted for the girl since then, and how much she would miss seeing her in the halls.

When Beth finished, Ms. Ohara started clapping. “Now you’ve said something worthwhile.”

I went to graduation for the first time to see the speech in its final form. Ari and I sat together on the bleachers, our thighs burning on the metal.

“Ms. Ohara had to kiss some major ass to make them accept Beth’s new speech,” he whispered to me as the graduates filed in.

“What?”

“You didn’t know?” Ari got smug. “They weren’t going to let her read the new draft, but Ms. Ohara went to bat for her.”

“Who told you that?”

Ari grinned. “Ms. Ohara. We chat after school a lot.”

“Cool,” I said, turning away. He was being annoying. He hadn’t even been in the room while they worked on the speech, and he was still trying to lord his time with Ms. Ohara over me.

The knot of anger in my chest didn’t unravel until Beth walked onstage to begin her speech. The crowd hushed down, but the woman next to me kept texting, completely oblivious. The *tac tac tac* of her typing was like pinpricks in my ears. I wanted to her to stop and listen more than anything in the world.

“Vicky,” Beth said. “I promise to keep rooting for you for the rest of our lives.” Her voice broke a little. I spotted Ms. Ohara down on the field, but I was too far away to read her expression. “Even when we can’t see each other in the halls, even if we grow more distant, nothing can change the fact that we loved each other once. That is what I want to take away from my high school experience.” The texting finally stopped beside me. “Thank you for everything, temporary as it was.” The crowd cheered for Beth. A load of anxiety melted off my shoulders. Beth wouldn’t get in trouble, Ms. Ohara was proven right, and the whole brutal process had meant something. Beth gave Ms. Ohara a huge hug before returning to her seat.

After the ceremony, I sat on the ground under the bleachers, alone. All the families had left to go find their graduate, but I didn't feel like I had a right to congratulate Beth—I barely knew her—so I let Ari go alone.

Ari wandered back half an hour later, when the field was nearly empty.

“Took you long enough,” I said, wiping dirt off my sore butt.

“Sorry, I got caught up talking to Ms. Ohara.”

“Oh,” I said. Maybe I should've gone over there after all.

“She told me the craziest thing. She's getting married. To a woman.”

“Huh?” I had no idea she was engaged. I didn't even know she was gay. I'd seen her every day for a month. How had none of this ever come up?

“Even better, she invited me to the wedding. Beth and all the other seniors are going too.”

“That's great,” I said, trying to hide my disappointment. She and Ari must have bonded more than I knew.

“Oh, and she said you should come too.”

I punched Ari in the arm. “You should've said that sooner.”

My curiosity was so strong that I was disgusted with myself for a moment. Was I desperate to go because I'd never seen a gay wedding before? I brushed the thought off. It wasn't any gay wedding. It was Ms. Ohara's. I wasn't going to miss it for the world.

CHAPTER TWO

The day of the wedding, I spent an hour figuring out what to wear. The only remotely appealing dress I owned was a sundress with daisies on it that my aunt had given me for Christmas two years back. The sleeve cut into my armpit, leaving a bulge of fat hanging out, but it would have to do. Getting new clothes was always a pain. My mom hated driving me to the mall, and would always hand me a lonely twenty-dollar bill to fund the entire trip. She didn't understand why I'd want something cuter than what I could get from Costco.

When I was in middle school, sparkly shirts in bright pink, purple, and orange were all the rage. I begged my mom for weeks to take me to Justice, the store where the other girls got their neon outfits. As soon as we walked inside, Mom exclaimed, "this place is hideous, it's giving me a headache!" so loud everyone stared at us. A girl from my class just happened to be there, and she told all the kids at school about my crazy mom. I didn't want to hear why the things I wanted were silly, so I just stopped telling my mom about them.

"Where are you headed with that fancy outfit?" Dad asked as I hurried around the dining room looking for a cardigan. He was working on his custom build computer, which had taken over the dining room table for the last two years and still didn't seem any closer to completion.

"I'm getting dinner with Ari," I said. Mentioning a wedding would only confuse my parents. They didn't even know who Ms. Ohara was.

"Is he taking you on a date?"

“He’s gay,” Mom called from the kitchen.

“How do you know that? He’s just a teenager. He could change his mind.”

“He’s definitely, definitely gay,” I said. Mom grunted in agreement. Dad turned back to a computer part, bored with the conversation.

I looked through the kitchen, skirting around Mom stirring a roiling pot of tomato sauce on the stove. Every weekend she made one big meal and boxed it up for dinner for the rest of the week. She was a stay-at-home mom for a while but returned to work after 2008. My parents tried to keep the details from me, but I knew we lost a lot when the market crashed.

“Veggie pasta again?” I asked.

“It’s healthy.”

“Yeah, but we had it last week. I’m sick of it.”

Mom shrugged, sprinkling basil into the pot. “If you don’t like it you can make something for yourself.”

“If I cook every night I won’t have time to finish my homework. Maybe we could order out every once in a while?”

“That’s such a waste of money when we have perfectly good food in the fridge.” I had tried requesting takeout many times now, always with the same answer. My parents both worked in tech, like most of the people who lived in Silicon Valley. They weren’t millionaires, but I knew we had enough money to live a nicer lifestyle than we did. They were both scared there’d be another recession and we’d lose everything.

I found my cardigan behind the couch. Mom gave up on keeping that area tidy a long time ago. The living room was also our dining room, since we weren’t allowed to move Dad’s computer project, and we’d gotten used to eating dinner at separate times in front of the TV.

“I’m going out,” I called from the doorway.

“Have fun,” Mom said. Dad didn’t even bother responding.

Most of the Asian kids I knew, the ones with real immigrant parents instead of a second-generation Chinese mom and white dad like me, would have killed for my independence. My parents just weren’t that concerned about me. Seventeen years without any major transgressions had given them a sense of security.

Ms. Ohara got married at a big property tucked away in the Santa Cruz mountains—the same place where the small tech company that my dad worked for had their annual picnic. Every year they gave out hard plastic cups with redwoods printed on them, and there was a stack of those cups eight high in my family’s cupboard. “No reason to waste them,” Dad always said.

Ari and I pulled into the gravel parking lot at the same time as Beth. Us students were only invited to the party, not the ceremony or dinner, and the sun was setting when we arrived.

“Did you guys bring a gift?” Beth asked, pulling a big blue box out of her trunk.

“Did we have to?”

“Of course,” Ari said. “It’s a wedding. I don’t know how I forgot. Shit.”

“Don’t worry,” Beth said. “The seniors all went in on a gift. I’ll let you guys sign the card.” She slipped a card out of a fold in the wrapping paper, and Ari snatched it away from her. He fished a pen out of his pocket started writing with intense concentration.

“Guess what we got her.” Beth handed me the box. It was heavy. When I shook it, something big rattled inside.

“A blender?” That was what my mom bought herself for Christmas last year. I got cash to buy my own gift, per usual, which I spent on a new desk chair.

“Hell no. That’s boring. It’s a picnic basket for romantic lesbian dates in the park.”

“Cool,” I said. Making a big deal out of Ms. Ohara’s sexuality felt rude to me, but Beth knew her better than I did. Maybe it was okay if she was doing it.

Ari finally finished his message and handed me the card. He’d smooshed a whole paragraph into the top left corner. I counted seven signatures, all long like Ari’s, filling the rest of the space. I flipped the card over and started writing on the back: *Thank you for inviting me! Wishing the best for you and your wife. — Juno.*

As soon as I was done, I regretted my choice. My message looked desperate, stark black against the untouched white of the back of the card.

We had to walk past a soccer field, where kids were still playing in the last rays of gold light, and the entrance to a family reunion to get to Ms. Ohara’s reception. A small sign with two blue balloons marked the spot—*Welcome to our Wedding, Danielle and Kristen, June 10, 2018.*

The wedding was in a glade with soft turf ground and string lights crisscrossing the open air. Some guests sat at long wooden picnic tables topped with blue candles, and the rest were huddled in circles on the dance floor. It was quaint.

“Beth! Ari!” a girl called from the dance floor. The whole circle of drama kids she was with turned. Beth and Ari ran at them, and everyone hugged like they hadn’t seen each other in years. They even embraced me, saying ‘hi’ and ‘how are you’ without expecting an answer.

“Guys, I still need to put the gift away,” Beth called over the chorus of greetings.

“I’ll take it.” I grabbed the box out of her hands and headed toward the gift table, grateful to escape.

I couldn’t help but notice the teachers in various states of intoxication. On the dance floor, Ms. Murphy was bent over trying to shake her ass, succeeding only in splashing her drink

on the ground. Mr. Lo, a history teacher, was at the picnic tables, leaning in and talking too loudly to a bored looking woman.

“What’d you get me?” I looked up, straight into Ms. Ohara’s eyes. Her cheeks were pink, and her hair lay like a fine-knit shawl over her sparkling white dress. I had to stop myself from looking down at the eye-catching crystals lining the top of her bodice.

“Ms. Ohara,” I said stupidly. “You look nice.” I held the box out. “It’s a picnic basket.”

“You’re not really supposed to tell me what it is.”

“Right.” My cheeks were burning. “Congrats. On the wife.” She tossed her head back and laughed at me. I caught the scent of wine on her breath. She smelled like my glamorous aunt at the end of Thanksgiving dinner.

“Ms. Ohara!” The drama students shrieked from behind me. The group charged at us, Ari’s curls bouncing wildly as he sprinted in the lead. They swarmed Ms. Ohara with compliments and she accepted them graciously, even holding her arms out and spinning to show off her dress. I slipped to the back of the group. I didn’t want to fight for her attention.

After two hours of dancing and eating and pretending to ooh and ahh at every detail in the wedding to appease the theater kids, I excused myself to sit at the picnic tables. My feet were aching from the too-small one-inch heels I was wearing—my mom’s from before she had me.

The night was winding down. Ms. Murphy had left or hidden herself somewhere I couldn’t see her, and Mr. Lo was sitting alone a few tables away. I watched the candle in front of me flicker and drip its jewel blue wax onto the plate beneath it.

“Can I sit here?” There was a boy standing beside me. He was too young to be friends with Ms. Ohara. Maybe he was a cousin from her white side? He slipped his legs over the bench and sat next to me. “Danielle’s student?” he asked.

“Yeah,” I said, even though I wasn’t technically her student. I didn’t know how to explain our relationship.

“I’m Kristen’s.” He noticed my confusion. “The other bride. I’m her student.” He pointed to the dance floor, where Ms. Ohara and her new wife were swaying in a tight embrace.

“She’s a teacher?”

“They both teach high school English.” It was easy to believe Kristin was a teacher. Her dress had long sleeves and a flat silhouette, making her look unassuming even on her own wedding day.

The boy introduced himself as Grant. He’d just graduated from a high school twenty minutes away from mine, where Kristen taught. He asked for my name.

“Juno,” he repeated after me. “Juno.” He kept saying it. “Juno, are you enjoying your night?” “Juno, did you like the cupcakes or the cookies better?” “Juno, do you have Instagram?” I sensed that picking up girls was a pastime of his. The exact girl wasn’t important.

I always avoided guys like that, even more than I avoided everyone else. I didn’t want to be tricked by a player. The last crush I had was on a boy in sixth grade, and it only lasted a month. I’d never had a boyfriend and my first reaction to boys was always apprehension.

Ari came to get me when the wedding started to empty out. As I walked away, Grant held up his phone. “I followed you!” he shouted. “Follow me back!”

Ari poked me in the arm. “Look at you, Sexy.”

“He seems like an asshole.”

“Which is why you talked to him for half an hour?” I didn’t realize it’d been that long. “Is the ice queen Juno finally falling for someone?”

“Definitely not.” I gave Ari a little push. He pushed me back, and then we were shoving each other and laughing. It was the most fun I had all night.

CHAPTER THREE

Everyone had to come to school to get their schedules the day before classes began. It was the official end of summer and the social debut of the school year. Ari texted me *see you at noon bestie* in the morning—the first we’d communicated in a long time.

I’d learned to get there early. When I arrived at 11:30 the line already wrapped around the hall. Ari got there at 12:30.

“Juno!” he shouted, running towards me with a girl in tow. They both crowded into my spot near the front of the line, oblivious to the people groaning behind them. “How was your summer? The best I assume.”

“It was okay. Boring, really.” I’d spent most of my summer in a blur of SATs and mindless work restocking shelves at Target.

“Yeah same. Mikayla and I did like every night shift together at the movie theater,” Ari said, gesturing to the girl. I recognized her as one of the popular kids. She was white, so it only made sense. The vast majority of our school was Asian, and even the people of other races were mostly immigrants. Only the real, all-American white people were living the high school experience you saw in movies—the rest of us were focused on college admissions.

Ari and Mikayla touched the tips of their pointer fingers together. “Closers,” they sang in unison. This girl clearly wasn’t going away any time soon.

When we finally got our schedules, we held them out in a circle to compare. Mikayla pointed to my first class.

“We have English together,” she said.

“Yeah,” I muttered. I looked over the rest of my schedule while Ari and Mikayla yammered on about having history together with the hot teacher, Mr. Lo. My third period class said *Teacher’s Assistant, Ms. Ohara*.

“Ms. Ohara chose me to be her TA,” I said. Students opted to TA or not, and from there it was a gamble to see who the teachers picked.

“Me too,” Ari said. There was an edge of offense to his voice.

“Are you guys part of her little tribe?” Mikayla asked.

“I wouldn’t call it that.”

Ari cut in. “We’re just friends. We went to her wedding.”

Mikayla stared hard at Ari, then at me. “Right,” she said. “That’s cool I guess. I have a free third.” She glanced at my schedule. “In case you ever want to ditch Ohara.”

“I’ll let you know.” I was definitely not going to take Mikayla up on her offer.

* * *

I had my license but still no car, so Mom drove me to school. Even Ari’s parents got him a beat-up car for his sixteenth birthday, and they worked at a church so they couldn’t be making that much money. Ari’s family was both Hawaiian and Mormon, a combination he told me was more common than you would think. As long as they didn’t find out he was gay, his parents were very generous with him. I used to hope that my parents had been saving for so long because they wanted to get me a car too, but by seventeen I’d realized a car was never coming. Instead, Mom dropped me off half an hour before school started every morning to beat the traffic.

“Have a good first day. Make friends,” she said, pulling up to the empty car circle in front of the campus.

“It’s the first day of senior year, not kindergarten.”

“That doesn’t mean you can’t make some new friends. Just be optimistic.” It was pointless to argue about something this silly. Mom didn’t understand the world I lived in.

“Okay, I’ll try.”

Once other students started arriving, I went to my first class. The desks were pushed into groups of four, so I chose a seat right in the front where a nerdy boy was hunched over his laptop playing Minecraft. Just as the bell rang, Mikayla burst through the door.

“Hey Juno!” she said, rushing in front of Mrs. Lewis to plunk down in the seat next to me, as if we were friends. Her vanilla perfume assaulted my nose.

Mrs. Lewis, a middle-aged woman with the straightest posture I’d ever seen, started lecturing the class about the immense difficulty of AP English. Mikayla leaned over.

“Do you have a pen?” She didn’t have a backpack. Just a big, floppy purse. I handed her an extra pen, and she started doodling on her arm. “We should hang out some time,” she whispered. I just nodded, hoping Mrs. Lewis wouldn’t notice. “This class is going to be so boring. I’m just gonna cram for the AP test, so the grade doesn’t even matter.”

“What?” I asked softly.

“Yeah, if you pass the AP test but do shit in the class the admissions people don’t even care. Especially if you’re doing STEM.”

“Sure,” I said. She didn’t know what she was talking about. Grades mattered for someone like me. Mikayla wasn’t going to the same kind of college I was. She didn’t even bring a pen to school.

“You gotta get on the college application Reddit page, girl. They spell it all out for you.”

“I think I’ll just keep doing my best on my own, thanks.”

Mrs. Lewis snapped her head towards us. “Ladies, please pay attention. You’ve barely been in school for five minutes.”

“Sorry, Mrs. Lewis,” Mikayla said, dripping in sweetness. I kept my eyes locked on my notes for the rest of class. I didn’t want Mikayla to look at me and roll her eyes at Mrs. Lewis like we were co-conspirators. I didn’t want to be Mikayla’s anything.

When third period came, I waited outside Ms. Ohara’s room for as long as possible. I counted twenty-three scratches in the paint on the door, then counted again to check my work. No one had come in yet, which meant Ms. Ohara didn’t have a class third period. It would be me and her alone for forty-five minutes. We hadn’t been alone together since the first time we met, and I was terrified of the awkward silence that was bound to ensue.

The second bell rang. I reached for the handle just as Ms. Ohara opened the door. Her long hair was cut to her chin, and the bottom half was dyed bright pink.

“Having doubts about being my TA?” she asked. Ms. Ohara’s whole energy had changed with her new hair. She seemed even less like a cookie-cutter teacher than she had before.

“No,” I said.

“Why are you waiting outside then?” I tried to think of an excuse, but my mind was blank. “You’re being weird,” she laughed.

“I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be sorry.” She opened the door further. The sweet scent of a candle drifted out. “Just be weird inside.” I walked in and she closed the door behind us.

“My number one TA rule,” Ms. Ohara began. “If you get food this period you have to bring some back for me.”

“We’re not allowed to leave during class time,” I said. It slipped out automatically.

“Are you joking? You should live a little, Juno. Most seniors spend more time at Starbucks than at school.”

“It’s just stressful. I don’t want to get caught.” I felt like a loser admitting that.

“You need exposure therapy. New TA rule. You have to break at least one rule a day.”

“So, if I don’t do anything then I’m technically still breaking the new rule?”

“Hm.” Ms. Ohara thought for a moment. “I guess you found a loophole.”

“I can’t believe I bested *the* Ms. Ohara. Or Mrs. Ohara now?”

She shook her head. “Just Ms. still.”

I nodded. I wasn’t worried about awkwardness anymore. I could say what I wanted around her. “Can I ask you a question? Why pink?”

She fingered the ends of her hair. It looked freshly dyed. “Do you like it?”

“It’s different.” I didn’t know what to think. Bright hair colors were only for teenagers in my mind. “It’s good.”

“You hate it,” she said.

“It’s just unexpected.”

“It was an impulse decision. I haven’t admitted that to anyone else.” She stuck her hand out. “Secret?”

“Of course.” I shook her hand.

“And one more secret.” She pulled a box out of the minifridge behind her desk. Inside was a pristine slice of cake with whipped white frosting and halved strawberries on top. “I got

you a little thank you gift for sitting in on all those graduation speech sessions last year. I hope my intensity didn't scare you."

"I wasn't scared. I found it fascinating."

"How so?"

"I kept thinking to myself, this teacher must be pretty amazing if Beth trusts her so much."

Ms. Ohara smiled. "Complimenting me is a sure-fire way to get more cake."

She handed me a plastic fork and I took a bite. The cake was delicate and sweet, clearly from a real bakery and not the supermarket down the road.

"Why is the cake a secret?" I asked.

"I didn't get any for Ari."

I smiled. We had two secrets now.

Ari drove us to McDonald's for lunch that day. Us now included Mikayla, who had wormed her way into our duo without anyone asking.

"Ohara's freshmen idolize me," Ari said, dunking a thin fry in ketchup.

"Already? It's been one day," Mikayla said from the back seat.

"That's how long it took us to become friends. I'm just overflowing with charisma. What do the kids think of you, Juno?"

"There are no kids third period. It's just me and her."

"Oof. That's rough," Mikayla said.

“Well.” I love it—that’s what I was going to say. But Mikayla wouldn’t get it, and Ari would be jealous. “It’s peaceful. I don’t need a bunch of fourteen-year-olds to worship me, unlike you Ari.”

He threw a fry at my chest. “You wish, bitch.” Mikayla launched a fry back at Ari.

“I’m on Juno’s side. Fuck kids.” We both pelted Ari with fries until he threatened to make us walk back to campus.

While we drove back to school, Ari and Mikayla talked about history with Mr. Lo.

“I think he’s universally considered the hottest male teacher at the school,” Ari said.

“I like an older man.” Mikayla leaned forward to stick her head between me and Ari.

“Someone with a beard, like that new chemistry teacher.”

“Ew, he’s like forty. Juno, Mr. Lo is hotter, right?”

“He doesn’t really do it for me, but his jawline is objectively strong.”

“Wow,” Mikayla said. “Ms. Ohara would be so jealous if she heard you guys right now.”

“What?” I said, right as Ari laughed. Either he drowned me out or Mikayla ignored my comment. I was miffed for a moment. I didn’t like Ms. Ohara because I thought she was hot; I was nothing like the Mr. Lo fangirls. I let the moment pass. I didn’t care what Mikayla thought anyway.

* * *

Ari and I had had the same dynamic for years—I pushed him away when he annoyed me too much, he came back desperate for approval, and I accepted him again when I started feeling lonely—until Mikayla showed up. They were stuck like glue as soon as the year started. Every lunch, every hang out, every day they were tittering to each other about things I didn’t understand or didn’t care about. At first, I was grateful. Ari could go to Mikayla for all his boy

drama. I always told him to focus on self-improvement instead of romance, and he hated that. But as the weeks wore on, I noticed just how precarious my position was. Without Ari, I would be absolutely friendless.

Ms. Ohara may have noticed my situation even before I did.

“Juno, I have a question.” I looked up from the quizzes I was grading. She liked to play music while we worked in third period, and Lana Del Ray was crooning in the background.

“When did you, Ari, and Mikayla become friends?”

“Ari and Mikayla worked together over the summer, and she tagged along with us when the school year started.”

“So you wouldn’t consider Mikayla your friend?” Not even the smallest omission got past her.

“We hang out a lot,” I said.

“And you like her?”

“What?” The proper response would have been ‘of course,’ but I didn’t want to lie to Ms. Ohara.

“I won’t tell Ari. I’m just curious.”

“She’s just so…” Mikayla was absolutely different from me. I was a goody two-shoes nerd, and she had been a hot girl her entire life, which gave her a careless confidence that drove me nuts sometimes.

“She’s not like you.”

“Yes!” I said. “We don’t click at all. We’re from two different worlds, but she still assumes we’re friends.”

“Well, you see each other every day, and you’re not mean to her face. That’s what friendship looks like to a lot of people.” I had no argument against that.

“If I stop hanging out with her, I’m going to lose Ari too. I can’t just tell her to bug off and leave me alone.”

Ms. Ohara shook her head. “That’s not what I’m saying at all.” My chest clenched up, an automatic response to an adult being disappointed in me. “When you’re very smart and very special, like you are Juno, it can be hard to let people in. Your relationships won’t always work right away, so you have to put effort into opening up. Otherwise, you could end up totally alone.” Ms. Ohara’s voice was heavy. I had no choice but to take her seriously.

“What should I do?”

“Find a reason to like Mikayla. I’m sure you can think of something.”

Mikayla was loud, inconsiderate, and honestly not as smart as me. But I could say the same about Ari. That was the best thing about Mikayla, I realized.

“I like how we can make fun of Ari together.”

Ms. Ohara tried to look disappointed, but I could tell she was amused. “Not ideal, but that’s a start.”

After my talk with Ms. Ohara, I tried to focus more on liking Mikayla. It worked. We got into a rhythm. Ari would talk, I would tease him, and Mikayla would back me up.

I also started spending more time in Ms. Ohara’s room. Ari and Mikayla were usually there with me at lunch, but before school I got to talk to Ms. Ohara alone. I told her about my progress with Mikayla, complained about how early Mom dropped me off, and shared my thoughts on books we read in AP English that would make me sound too nerdy to anyone else. We already got along better than Ari and I ever had.

CHAPTER FOUR

I'd only ever been notable for being smart, but things started to change as Ari, Mikayla and I became a true trio. They were both popular—Mikayla for having D-cup boobs since she was thirteen and Ari for being the only visibly gay guy at the school—and people tended to lump us together. There were four freshman girls that Ari TA'ed for who were particularly obsessed with us.

Three of the freshman girls were the popular type: already wearing makeup, dating boys, and drinking on weekends. Ari and Mikayla took those three under their wing. The fourth friend, Astrid, liked me. She was bookish, with wide eyes behind her plastic glasses, and I knew she wouldn't last with the pretty girls.

They all sat at a table group together in Ms. Ohara's class on the first day of school, before people sifted themselves into the appropriate social categories. They didn't realize yet that their relationship was mismatched, and Ms. Ohara found that enchanting, so she always kept them together when she changed the seating arrangement. "I have a duty to preserve friendship," she explained.

The girls loved Ms. Ohara so much they hung around her room at lunch at least two days a week. Ari and Mikayla were also there more often than not, and of course I was a fixture. The girls always huddled around the three of us, asking us questions like "do you have a boyfriend?" or "what's it like being able to drive?"

One day, Astrid approached me clutching a few stapled papers in her hand while her friends waved her on from behind.

“Excuse me,” she said, as if she was talking to a teacher. “Ms. Ohara told me you’re an excellent writer, and I was wondering if you’d give me notes on a story I wrote.” I found Ms. Ohara’s gaze across the room. She winked and waved her hands in a *go ahead* gesture.

“That’s sweet, Astrid, but I’m not all that great. You should ask Ms. Ohara.” Astrid was cute, but I had an inkling her story would be awful. I didn’t want to be responsible for giving notes.

“She already told me to ask you.” I shot Ms. Ohara an annoyed glance and she smiled, feigning innocence. Always one step ahead. I took the papers out of Astrid’s hands, and her friends cheered.

The story was so bad I read it to my parents that night. By 9:00pm Dad was working on his computer build at the dining room table, his bowl of meal-prepped chicken and cauliflower getting cold beside him, and Mom was reading a thick book on the couch. I stood between rooms where they could both hear me.

“‘I woke up and tossed my silky black hair off the pillow, then pulled on my tattered converse to start the day.’ That’s the first line. She puts her shoes on straight out of bed.”

Dad blew air out of his nose, amused but only half paying attention. Mom was more attentive, setting down her worn copy of *A Tale of Two Cities*.

“At least she’s detailed. Maybe she has potential.” I was annoyed. Why was Mom brutally honest with me, but optimistic when it came to a stranger’s writing?

“Well, the pacing is a mess. It’s all about this girl confessing to her crush, but she spends most of the story gushing about an upperclassman who gives her advice. I think the upperclassman is supposed to be me.”

“I highly doubt that. It’s probably a coincidence,” Dad said. While Mom was overly optimistic, he was overly skeptical.

“It’s totally me. The character’s name is Jane. Just two letters off from Juno.”

“Are you flattered?” Mom asked. I flipped through the story again. It was hard to be flattered by such a poor representation. Jane was so much smarter than the narrator that she sounded like a therapist.

“I’m more concerned than flattered. She might have a crush on me.”

“A crush on you specifically?” Dad asked.

“Is that so hard to believe?” I said.

“I don’t know if I’d call it a crush, but I understand what you mean,” Mom said. “When someone’s older than you they can seem perfect, and it’s easy to develop intense feelings towards them. This girl probably wants your approval.”

“So, not a crush, but admiration?” I still thought Astrid had feelings for me, but it wasn’t worth convincing my parents.

Mom nodded. “Probably. A crush is only one step beyond admiration. It’s easy to confuse one for the other, especially when you’re young. Juno, you might not understand because you’ve never had a crush before.”

“I haven’t?”

“You’ve never told me about any,” Mom said. I stared at her for a second. Sure, I hadn’t had a serious crush since middle school, but even then I didn’t tell my parents. Didn’t Mom

assume that I had a life outside what I told her about? Reading Astrid's story aloud was the most I'd talked to my parents all week.

"So, do you think I should just ignore this girl and it'll go away?"

"Teenage girls are like goldfish. They don't remember what's not in front of them," Dad said.

"Don't be cruel," Mom said. "Juno, if you don't do anything to encourage this girl I'm sure it'll fade on its own. Maybe she'll get a boyfriend." I thought of Astrid's chubby, bespectacled face. Romance didn't seem in the cards for her any time soon.

"I'll just keep a healthy distance." Mom and Dad seemed satisfied with that and turned back to their respective entertainment.

"What grade did Ms. Juno give Astrid's paper?" Ms. Ohara asked the next day.

I crossed my arms and stuck out my hip to pretend I was mad. Playfighting was part of our dynamic. "Astrid would cry if she knew you were making fun of her."

"Let's be clear. I'm only making fun of you."

"I think she's in love with me. I need to turn her down or something."

"It's just a childhood crush, she isn't even aware of it herself." Ms. Ohara accepted Astrid's feelings for me right away. It was so much easier to talk to her than to my parents. She felt more like a friend than an authority figure.

I pointed to a line in the story. "Her lips puckered into a perfect red heart as she considered my question. Her lip gloss smelled like strawberries.' How could she not know?"

"It's evocative imagery." Ms. Ohara was really enjoying this. "Most girls have to fall in love with a woman ten times before they know what's happening."

“Is that what you did?” I’d never asked Ms. Ohara a direct question about her sexuality before, but I was secretly burning with curiosity. She was the first lesbian I’d ever met.

“Definitely. I was falling in love with women left and right, all while dating the most blasé men. I didn’t realize my sexuality until junior year of college.”

“So, I could be gay and not even know it?” I joked. Ms. Ohara didn’t laugh. She gave me a quizzical look.

“Do you think you are?”

I hadn’t thought about it much. I’d always had crushes on boys when I was little, picking the ones with curly hair or fast mile times and diving deep into silent obsession, but I hadn’t had a serious crush since starting high school. I’d been busy with classes, and the boys were only getting gawkier and stinkier. Girls were definitely more beautiful, but they inspired a nervous discomfort in me.

“I’ve never had a crush on a girl.”

Ms. Ohara squinted at me like she was trying to read a faraway sign. “Okay.”

“How do you tell if you like a girl? Is it different from liking a guy?”

“In my relationships with men growing up I would get excited by thought of speaking to them, then the real thing would disappoint me. With women I would think about them constantly, and every time I saw them in person they blew me away even more.”

“Is that how you felt about your wife?”

Ms. Ohara’s smile dropped. “I really shouldn’t be discussing this with you. It’s personal.”

“I won’t tell anyone. I’m sorry.” Maybe Ms. Ohara was worried people would think she was spreading some sort of agenda. Or maybe I had overstepped by bringing up the present rather than dwelling on her romantic past.

“It’s fine. Let’s just get to work.” She went behind her desk. Ms. Ohara was quiet for the rest of the period, and I stewed in shame.

Astrid was waiting for me in Ms. Ohara’s room at lunch. I didn’t say anything, just handed the story back with a few notes on the structure. Before she even looked at what I wrote, she wrapped me in a big hug.

“You’re incredible, Juno,” she said. Across the room, Ms. Ohara formed her hands into a little heart. I’d been worried that I upset her beyond repair, and the gesture filled me with relief.

I hate you, I mouthed at her. She smiled as Astrid continued squeezing the life out of me.

When the first bell rang marking the end of lunch and everyone started going to class, Ms. Ohara signaled to me to hang back.

“I just wanted to thank you for the entertainment,” she said, closing the door before any of her students could come in the room. It was just us now. “You’ll have to forgive me for having so much fun at your expense.”

“I don’t forgive you,” I teased. “You’ll have to make it up to me somehow.”

Ms. Ohara twirled a piece of her hair, pretending to think. “How about I give you one compliment. Does that sound like enough?”

“Two. Final offer.”

“Tough bargainer.” She walked over so we were only a foot away from each other. I looked straight in her eyes and didn’t break contact. This felt like a new game, a new way to prove myself.

“One,” she began, “you handled Astrid’s less than excellent story with grace. Two, I’m not at all surprised that Astrid is enamored with you. You’re worthy of admiration.”

My heart beat faster. I was used to being called smart, responsible, respectful—all compliments reserved for children who know their place and don't talk back—but I'd never felt admirable.

“Does that help?” Ms. Ohara asked. I nodded, not trusting myself to speak. “And one more thing, I'm sorry for being short with you earlier. You mentioned the wedding and that's just...” She broke eye contact with me, staring off into the space beside my head. “It's just a sensitive subject. A personal one. I'm sure you understand.”

I nodded again, though I wasn't sure I did understand. She'd invited me to the wedding, but now I couldn't even mention it? Sometimes Ms. Ohara swung me from friend to student so fast I felt dizzy. I could see what my mom had been saying about Astrid now—admiration and love were shockingly close to one another, and easy to confuse. Ms. Ohara thought I was worthy of admiration, and I felt the same about her. That was all. I shouldn't confuse it for the intimacy of true friendship.

CHAPTER FIVE

I would've been oblivious to the anticipation that charged the school near Homecoming if not for Ari's obsession with getting on the court. Mikayla was on the court last year, quite a feat for a junior, and was happy to be out of the running this time. Ari wanted to catch up to her.

Everyone in the school got to nominate two people, and those with the most nominations became the Homecoming court. From there, another vote decided the king and queen. It was considered gauche to campaign for Homecoming court, and most of the students didn't care about anything other than grades and wrote in joke names, so it took as little as ten nominations to get on the court.

Homecoming was in October, when chill began to invade the mornings and settle us into the long year ahead.

It was the day the court was supposed to be announced, and by third period, Ari already sent thirty panicked texts to our group chat with Mikayla.

"Ari's nervous about Homecoming nominations," I said to Ms. Ohara, resting my elbows on the papers I was supposed to be grading. Whenever Ari wouldn't stop bothering me about something, I vented to her.

"Really?" she said. That meant she was ready to engage. I'd learned her patterns: a verbal response was good, a *hm* meant she was tired but willing to talk, and silence meant something bad had happened and I shouldn't speak for the rest of the period.

“Oh yeah, he’s about to burst a blood vessel. Doesn’t he realize all those girls who want him to be their gay best friend will vote him in? Plus, he’s got at least thirty votes from your fifth period freshmen.”

“Oh definitely. They worship him. Are you worried?”

“No, of course not. Ari’s going to be fine.”

“No, are you worried about whether you’ll get on the court or not?”

“Me? On Homecoming court. Yeah, I’m not worried that’s going to happen.” My phone buzzed. Another text from Ari: *OMG only five minutes until the period ends and I learn my fate !!!* I closed my phone without responding.

“Would you be upset if you were on the court?”

“That would never happen, so no.”

Ms. Ohara rolled her eyes. I was secretly happy that she was comfortable expressing her annoyance with me sometimes. If I knew when she was annoyed, then I also knew when she was happy, and it seemed like she enjoyed my presence most of the time. “Just entertain the idea, would you?”

“Fine.” I tried to picture myself on the Homecoming court, parading down the football field at halftime, and clapping politely while the king and queen were crowned. I could see the scene, but not me in it. What would I even wear? The half-shrunken sundress I wore to Ms. Ohara’s wedding? “I would embarrass myself. I don’t have any dresses that are remotely fancy enough.”

“Dresses can be bought. Just think about the experience. Wouldn’t you like to have the whole school admiring you?”

I pictured the scene again, this time looking out on the crowd and listening to their applause. I didn't hate it. "It could be fun, I guess. But I don't think enough people even know my name for me to get nominated."

Ms. Ohara's mouth twitched up, like she was holding back a smile. I narrowed my eyes.

"What did you do?"

"Nothing," she said, the corners of her mouth curving up further.

"Tell me. You did something."

"I didn't. I can't even vote, I'm a teacher. What could I have possibly done?" The bell rang, and kids started streaming into the halls. I knew somewhere on campus Ari was sprinting to the quad to see the Homecoming court list posted up there. "Shouldn't you go find Ari?" Ms. Ohara asked.

"He'll be fine. I'm not leaving until you tell me why you look so pleased with yourself right now."

My phone buzzed. Another text from Ari: *OH MY GOD*. I closed my phone, only for it to buzz again. *COME HERE*.

"Seems like Ari wants something," Ms. Ohara said.

"He's fine." It buzzed again. *COME!!!! NOW!!!!* He repeated those two words over and over again, spamming the group chat until it was just a wall of all-caps text. "Ugh, I'll be right back."

I pushed into the throng of people straining to see the list of names in the quad. Ari was standing at the front. He wasn't crying, which was a good sign, but he had a crazed look in his eyes.

“Juno!” He pointed emphatically at the list. His name was at the top. I gave him two thumbs up. “No, look,” he said. I followed his finger down. It was all the usual suspects, popular girls and jocks, and—

“Congrats,” said a boy next to me, clapping me on the shoulder. I didn’t know his name.

“Nice, Juno,” said another girl. Did she even go to this school?

My name was right there on the list in big block letters. It had to be a prank. Maybe the students pretending to congratulate me were hired actors. I didn’t know who was responsible, but they were definitely laughing at me. I ducked my head and ran back to Ms. Ohara’s room before Ari could get out and follow me.

“I’m nominated,” I said, bursting into the room.

“I told you.”

“It’s a prank or something. I’m this year’s loser. Last year they voted in that guy who can only grow half a mustache, and this year it’s me.” Ms. Ohara held her hand up to stop me.

“How do you know this isn’t a serious nomination?”

“Why the fuck would people vote for me?” I forgot to hold my language back for Ms. Ohara, but she didn’t even blink.

“Maybe because you’re smart? Or you’re Ari’s friend? Or they can tell you’re a great person?”

“No,” I shook my head. “None of that would get me nominated for Homecoming. There’s some reason people thought of me.”

Ms. Ohara was quiet. The corner of her mouth twitched up again. I stormed over, getting close to her face.

“What did you do? Tell me.” She broke into a full smile.

“Look, a lot of kids don’t know who to vote for with these things. It takes up less class time if I give them a suggestion, and who should I suggest if not my two wonderful TAs?”

“You got all your students to vote for me?”

“Of course not. I just put an idea in their heads. Honestly, Astrid did a lot of the work for me. She was really trying to convince her whole class to nominate you.”

I sank into a chair. My head was spinning. None of this felt real. A minute ago I thought no one knew my name, and now it was plastered up in the quad. Maybe I should’ve been mad at Ms. Ohara. If she had asked me if I wanted to be offered up for nomination, I would’ve said no. But now that it was happening, I wasn’t sure I hated the attention. Maybe Ms. Ohara knew what I needed better than I did.

“Shit. I need to buy a dress.”

“Since it’s my fault you’re nominated, I can help you find one.”

“Really?” I said, perking up. “You’ll take me to the mall? That would be so helpful. My mom hates driving me.”

Ms. Ohara nodded. “Saturday?”

I agreed right away. It was a silver lining to this whole mess.

Mom came home at eight with an armful of groceries. I was sitting in the dining room instead of holed up in my bedroom like usual, buzzing with the Homecoming news. I was surprised how excited I was.

“I got nominated for Homecoming court,” I said as soon as she set her bags down.

“That’s nice,” she replied, and walked back out to the garage. I trotted after her.

“It’s kind of a big deal. Only ten people get nominated in the whole school.” She hoisted the rest of the grocery bags out of the trunk and slammed it shut.

“What was that honey?” It was impossible to get her to pay attention to me when she had a task on her mind. I took a bag off her arm and gave up on speaking.

I restarted the conversation while I stacked cans in the cupboard. “Like I was saying earlier, I got nominated for the Homecoming court. With Ari.”

“That’s strange. That doesn’t sound like you,” Mom said, reaching over me to move a can down to a different shelf.

“Aren’t you happy for me?”

“Sure. I’m just surprised.” The whole reason my nomination was exciting was because it was out of the ordinary. Mom didn’t seem to care at all. “I’m glad you’ve made more friends. I can’t believe you got enough votes to win. Or did you get nominated by a teacher again?” she asked.

“No, other students.”

“Why did they choose you?”

“I don’t know. They think I’m cool or their friends got them to vote for me.” Having to explain everything to her was sucking the joy out of it.

“What happens now?”

“Well, I get to walk on the field in a fancy dress during the Homecoming football game, and then I have to go to the dance. They’re also going to crown a king and queen, but I have no shot at that.”

“Hm. That’s nice. Do we have to buy you a new dress?” She couldn’t bask in my achievement for one second before making it about money. I was glad to have Ms. Ohara to shop with.

“No, I already have someone else taking me to the mall. You don’t have to worry about that.”

“Oh good. You know I hate shopping.” She didn’t ask who I was going with, and I didn’t offer the information up. Keeping secrets was easier than explaining the truth.

* * *

On Saturday afternoon, Ms. Ohara texted me that she was outside. We’d exchanged numbers at the beginning of the year for TA purposes, but this was her first time texting me. I shouted goodbye to my mom—Dad had been called into the office—before stepping out, but she didn’t respond. She was also finishing up something from work and was probably too absorbed to hear me. My parents often worked on weekends to stay in the good graces of their bosses.

I scanned the road along the front of my house, but there were no cars to be seen. *Where are you??* I texted Ms. Ohara.

Side of the house. Red jeep, she responded. I found her idling by the back corner of the house, out of view of the main road. I’d seen the bright red jeep in the teacher’s lot at school, but I always assumed it belonged to some burly man, not her.

“Hey there,” I said, hoisting myself up into the passenger seat. The inside of her car was just as pristine as the outside. A thick, sweet scent wafted out from an air freshener jammed in the vents.

“Hello,” she replied, already pulling away from the curb. Instead of taking the main road in front of us she drove further into the suburbs, as if she was afraid to pass by the windows of

my house. I was grateful. If my mom saw us she might ask questions I didn't want to bother answering.

"It's a nice day," Ms. Ohara said.

"Real nice." She didn't respond. My mind raced trying to think of something to say. It was easy to talk to her at school, but in the confines of her car any rapport we'd built up crumbled away. She didn't seem too chatty either. I let the silence settle in between us as cars flashed by.

We drove past the exit for the mall. There was no GPS on, so either Ms. Ohara was lost or she knew exactly where we were going. Either way I said nothing. We slipped past the choked-up cars trying to get to downtown San Jose and crested an overpass that rose high above the freeway, giving me a view of the rolling green hills that usually seemed so far away. We'd been driving for forty-five minutes when she peeled off into the parking lot for a huge outlet mall.

"I've never been here before," I said.

"Better deals," she replied.

She pulled into a parking spot and got out of the car without a word. She was already walking inside by the time my feet hit the ground, and I jogged after her into the mall. She was only this quiet when something was wrong. She was probably regretting her choice to take me shopping. It had to be annoying to give up your Saturday to spend time with a student. I wished she'd just tell me to go away if that was what she wanted. I felt like a burden.

I barely kept up with Ms. Ohara as she led us through the packed concourse. She stopped in front of a massive store with long sparkly dresses in its window display.

“This is a good store,” she said, and entered without looking back to see if I followed. The entire store was filled with long clothing racks stocked with fancy dresses. A pink ballgown next to the entrance caught my eye. It was exactly the kind of dress I loved as a little girl—princess-y and extravagant. I found the price tag. \$499. My mom had given me a hundred dollar bill that morning and told me to splurge.

“Ms. Ohara, is there somewhere cheaper we could check first?” I looked up to find her wandering the racks across the store. I headed to the clearance section.

In twenty minutes, I’d found the only two dresses that were in my size and my budget: a boxy green polyester dress and a short, velvet number with long sleeves.

“Juno, what are those?” I jumped. Ms. Ohara had snuck up beside me in the line for the dressing room. It was my first time talking to her since we’d entered the store.

“Just some dresses,” I said sheepishly. Ms. Ohara fingered the green dress. The fabric was thick, like one of my mom’s suit skirts from the 90’s.

“You like this?”

I shrugged. I didn’t think they were pretty, but I wasn’t a girl who wore pretty dresses. My mom always called herself plain, having accepted it as fact when she was young, and we looked enough alike that I knew she thought the same of me, though she never said it aloud.

An employee gestured to an open dressing room and I gladly rushed inside, closing the door on Ms. Ohara’s disapproving glare.

The velvet dress didn’t get over my hips, but I managed to put on the green one that Ms. Ohara thought was so atrocious. I didn’t like the way the skirt flared awkwardly under my waist, nor the high cut neckline, but it was comfortable and, most importantly, \$64.99.

Ms. Ohara was waiting for me when I left the dressing room. She had a long, satiny red dress in her arms.

“Try this one,” she said, shoving the dress in my hands. The fabric was smooth and cool.

“I can’t,” I said.

“Why not?”

I didn’t have the money to pay for it, but that was too embarrassing to admit. I held up the green dress. “I already found one.”

“That dress is too short. The court members wear long dresses.” She pushed the red dress on me again. “Try it on.”

I’d already done something in the car to make her go quiet, and I couldn’t make her angrier now. “Fine.” I took the red dress back into the dressing room.

I zipped the strapless bodice up as far as I could reach on my back. It was a beautiful dress. The top cinched the smallest part of my waist before flaring out into an elegantly draped skirt that just brushed the ground. It wasn’t the princess dress I’d wanted as a child. It was more mature than that, sexy even. I’d never had an item of clothing I could call sexy before.

“Juno,” Ms. Ohara called from the other side of the door. “Can I see?”

“Just a minute.” I tossed my jacket over my clothes to hide my bra and opened the door.

“Wow.” Ms. Ohara stared at me. “It looks great.”

“Thanks,” I muttered, shifting my weight from foot to foot under her gaze.

“Can I see the back?” I turned around. Ms. Ohara came close and I felt the cold bite of metal rushing up my back. “Let me zip it for you,” she said with her fingers already brushing my skin.

I faced the mirror at the end of the hall. The dress hugged my chest now, framing the small amount of cleavage I had in its heart-shaped neckline. The red brought out a flush in my cheeks.

“Do you like it?”

“Of course.” I ran my hands along the smooth skirt. “I wish...”

“What?”

“Well.” Ms. Ohara was finally smiling at me. I couldn’t ruin it now. I found the price tag and tried to glance at it without seeming too obvious.

“Well?”

The dress was \$300. “I just.” My breath hiccupped. Oh god. I couldn’t cry about this. “I just.” I couldn’t tell her the truth. I gestured to the velvet dress. “I’m getting that one.”

“Juno, I’m telling you this because I care about you. That dress is hideous.”

I buried my face in my hands. “I know.” I couldn’t hold it back any longer; a sob escaped my throat. I felt Ms. Ohara’s arms wrap around me. Her embrace was warm.

“What’s wrong?” she whispered.

“It’s too expensive.”

“Honey,” she pet my hair. “I’ll buy it for you.”

I looked up at her in shock. “Ms. Ohara. You can’t.”

“I said I’d take you dress shopping.” But not that she’d buy me a dress.

“I don’t need you to. I can ask my mom. It’s okay, really.”

“Juno, I’m buying you the dress.” She spun me to face the mirror. My face was swollen and damp, but I still looked beautiful in the dress. “You’re going to upstage Ari.”

I scoffed. “Thank you.”

I thanked her again and again—after I changed back into my jeans, in line for the register, and on the way to the car.

“You have to take this,” I said, holding out the hundred dollar bill my mom had given me. “I can get money from my parents to pay for the rest, too. We can afford it.”

Ms. Ohara pushed the bill away. “If you can afford it, why did you only come to the mall with a hundred dollars?”

I shrugged. “My mom doesn’t know how much these things cost. She doesn’t think stuff like clothing is important.”

“Feeling good about how you look is always important. Don’t worry about the money.”

“But—”

“It’s nothing to me. Teachers make more in our district than you’d think. One of the perks of working at a good school. Plus, I don’t have anyone else to spend it on. I’m not having kids. I work summer school to make more money too. Does that help?”

I nodded slowly. “I’m glad you can afford it.” I stuck out the bill again. “But take this, please. Otherwise, my mom’s going to ask questions.”

Ms. Ohara eyed the bill, and finally grabbed it. “Fine. Just for your peace of mind.”

The sky was dark as we drove home. The hills were a sparkling array of lights shrinking behind us.

“I think I made you mad on the way here,” I said. “I don’t know what I did, but I’m sorry.”

“You didn’t do anything.” Ms. Ohara sighed. “I love dress shopping. I haven’t done it since the wedding.” I kept quiet while she dipped into her own thoughts. “I shouldn’t have been

so cold to you. It's not your fault. I hope you're not angry." I shook my head. How could I be angry with the red dress laying on the backseat?

"As long as I know you're not mad at me."

"Oh, Juno." Ms. Ohara took her eyes off the road for a second to look at me. "Not at all. I'm proud of you. You looked beautiful."

My cheeks burned at the compliment. "Since you're not mad, can I ask why you bought the dress for me?"

"You looked so good in it," Ms. Ohara said.

"Oh." Could she be coming on to me? She *was* a lesbian, and though I'd never been on a date, I imagined they'd be something like this. A long car ride, a trip to the mall, a gift. I'd heard about teacher-student relationships, but things like that didn't happen at a good school like ours, and they certainly didn't happen to me. Ms. Ohara wasn't the gross old man that a predatory teacher was supposed to be. And anyway, she was married. I couldn't believe she would want to date me.

"When I was your age, I never wore pretty dresses. That's all I meant by the comment," she said. "I didn't think they were for me. My parents taught me to worry about school and nothing else. I had the chance to give you the dress I never had, so I took it."

"Yeah, of course. I knew what you meant." I instantly felt terrible for assuming Ms. Ohara was trying to flirt with me. It was a gay stereotype—the homosexual predator—and I fell victim to it. I pushed any inkling of romantic thoughts out of my head. That wasn't who Ms. Ohara was.

Ms. Ohara parked on the side of the house again and I carried the dress in its plastic garment bag across the lawn. The bag crinkled with every step, loudly announcing its presence. I

did my best to open the front door quietly, hoping to sneak the dress into my room without questions.

“What’d you get?” Mom asked, appearing in the foyer. “That looks like a big dress.”

“The court members wear long dresses.” I held the bag behind my back.

“Let me see it.” I reluctantly pushed the dress forward, lifting the plastic bag up to release the length of the skirt. “It’s beautiful, honey. Quite the steal.” She reached out to feel the fabric and came dangerously close to the price tag. I whipped the dress back.

“It was on clearance.”

“You really are my daughter, looking for a deal,” she laughed.

Once I was alone in my room, I cut the tag into pieces before throwing it away.

CHAPTER SIX

My name stayed up in the quad for two weeks. I could feel extra eyes on me everywhere I went. We voted again to decide the official king and queen a week before the Homecoming game.

“Ju-no. Ah-ri,” Mikayla said as she wrote out her votes in first period.

“Please keep your ballots anonymous,” Mrs. Lewis said.

“Sorry, sounding it out helps me spell,” Mikayla replied, winking at me. Sometimes it was fun to see how much she could get away with. I saw the silent boy who sat at our table group scribble my name down too.

I only started to get nervous on the day of Homecoming. It was a Friday, and the game would be in the evening with the dance to follow. Ari was stressed about whether he’d win king, but I could care less about being queen. I was more worried about being paraded in front of the entire school.

“Just be your sexy self,” Mikayla said. It was lunch, and I was stressing with her and Ari in Ms. Ohara’s room. The freshman girls were in the corner going over their outfit plans for the dance.

“You’re the only one who thinks I’m sexy.”

“You don’t know that,” Ari said. “A bet a bunch of people secretly think you’re hot. Ohara, do any of your students have a secret crush on one of us?” He’d been dropping the “Ms.” lately. It was annoying.

“I don’t think it’d be appropriate for me to tell you even if they did.” I made eye contact with Ms. Ohara and she raised her eyebrows slightly, too quick for the other two to see. I liked knowing she gave me special treatment over Ari and Mikayla. I looked over to where Astrid was giggling with her friends, but she didn’t seem to notice our conversation.

“Okay, none of this is helpful to me,” I said. “I don’t even know what I’m supposed to do when they bring us out during the football game.”

“I’ll show you,” Ari said. He pulled me and Mikayla into the center aisle between the desks and took his place at the front of the room, like a priest at the end of a wedding procession. “Girls, can you help me out?” The freshman girls sprung up immediately. Ari arranged them in pairs in front of me and Mikayla.

“Each couple goes ten steps after the couple in front of them,” he said, and started clapping his hands to a steady beat. The girls walked in perfect unison, arm in arm with one another. Even Astrid seemed to know what to do instinctually.

Mikayla and I locked arms. I stepped forward, imagining the eyes of the school on me.

“Wait!” Ari cried. “Juno, you look ridiculous.”

“Really? I took one step.”

“You look like you’re doing the robot,” he said.

Mikayla nodded. “You’re kind of crushing my arm, too.”

“So what am I supposed to do?”

Ms. Ohara walked down the aisle and gestured for Mikayla to step aside. She slipped her arm through mine. “Like this,” she said. “Step with your right foot.” We stepped forward in unison, continuing down the aisle. I could feel the movement of her whole body through our connection. She was easy to follow.

“You got it, Juno!” Astrid said, squealing with the rest of the girls.

“Okay!” Ari said. “I guess we don’t need to practice.” Ms. Ohara’s arm slipped out of mine, and the air felt cold on my skin where she’d been touching me.

“Good job,” Ms. Ohara said.

“Thanks.” I broke eye contact with her to find Ari glaring at me. He knew I was closer to Ms. Ohara than him, and he couldn’t stand it. Mikayla was staring too, but she didn’t look angry—more weirded out. I hoped she didn’t think anything strange was happening between me and Ms. Ohara.

Mikayla offered to get me ready at her house, which was a godsend. The only makeup I owned was tinted ChapStick and a dried-out tube of mascara. I ended up with Mikayla in front of me painting my eyelids and her mom behind me curling my hair. Ari was there too, chatting up a storm with Mikayla’s mom. They got along really well. Ari told her his favorite story about how he kissed the guy who played the same part as him in the musical last year and she oohed and aahed at all the right parts.

“After the dance we’re all going to my place. My parents had a calling to go on a mission trip, so I’m gonna have a small party, nothing crazy,” Ari said. I had my eyes closed for Mikayla to do my eyeshadow, but I gave her leg a squeeze. Ari was about to get her grounded.

“A party?” Mikayla’s mom asked. I gripped Mikayla’s leg harder. “Sounds fun. If you’re going to drink, make sure everyone has a designated driver. Do you guys need me to buy alcohol for you?” I let Mikayla go. What the hell was going on?

“No,” Mikayla said. “I have plenty of bottles left over from the party I threw over the summer.” I had to fight to keep my mouth from hanging open in shock. This was a whole new world for me. My parents would have a heart attack if they knew I was drinking.

Ari seemed strangely comfortable with the situation. His parents were Mormon, and he would be kicked out if they heard a word of this conversation. Mikayla’s family must’ve been a welcome fantasy for him.

“All done here,” Mikayla’s mom said, fluffing my newly curled hair.

“I’m just about done too,” Mikayla said.

“Take a look, sweetheart.” Mikayla’s mom showed me to the bathroom. I barely recognized myself in the mirror. My hair fell in loose curls around my shoulders and my face was completely altered—smoky eyes, contour that cut cheekbones out of my round face, and ginormous fake eyelashes. I slipped into Mikayla’s room to change into the red dress that Ms. Ohara bought me. In it, I really looked like royalty.

The game had just begun when we got to the field. A few of the young teachers were there to help parade the court around. Of course, Ms. Ohara was one of them.

“You three look very nice,” she said. She was using a formal tone, trying to be subtle for the spectators filling the bleachers behind us.

“Do we look as sexy as you expected, Ohara?” Ari asked. Mr. Lo, Ari and Mikayla’s history teacher, glanced over at us. I elbowed Ari to make him shut up.

“I don’t think I expected sexy, per say, but you look nice. Juno, you’ll have to tell me where you got that dress later.”

“Of course, *Ms. Ohara*,” I said, dragging Ari to the stands before he could do any more damage.

There was a little section roped off for the Homecoming court in front of where the spirit leaders were teaching cheers to the crowd. Mikayla squeezed into a spot behind us and told me when to cheer and when to boo, since I had no idea how the game worked. I never thought I’d enjoy football, but my heart raced with exhilarating energy as I screamed with the rest of the crowd.

At half time, the teachers gathered all the court members up and paired us off to walk down the field. I ended up next to Kieran Walsh, a football player. His uniform smelled like a sour wet dog. I usually didn’t talk to athletes, but I decided to act royally just for the night.

“Kieran, right?”

“Yeah.” His voice was low and gruff. “You don’t know who I am?” He was exactly the kind of stuck-up jock I pegged him to be.

“Sorry that not everyone in the school knows your name.”

“No, no.” His face crumpled into genuine disappointment. “It’s just, we’ve known each other since elementary school, Juno. We were in the same class in second grade.”

“Oh.” I didn’t remember that. In my mind, he emerged from the womb as a fully formed football player. “Sorry.”

“It’s okay,” he shrugged. “You’re one of those kids.”

“What kids?”

“Nothing. It’s not nice.”

I rolled my eyes. “I can handle it.”

“Smart kids. You only care about school.”

“A teacher’s pet?” I was used to that label. It didn’t bother me anymore. Who cared what someone like Kieran thought.

“Your words, not mine,” he said. The couple in front of us started moving forward—our cue to shut up. I slipped my arm in his, trying my best to avoid getting his sweat on me.

I wobbled down the field, immediately stepping out of unison with Kieran. The floodlights washed the world into a white haze. I felt like I was inside an aquarium, the crowd’s cheers growing wavy and distant while invisible currents pushed me forward. I climbed onto a small stage with the rest of the court. The crowd was a writhing mess of red and gold. The principal appeared onstage with a white envelope in her hands and shouted some words into the microphone, sending up cheers in the crowd. She placed a crown on a girl’s head on the other side of the stage, then placed a crown on Ari. He burst into happy tears, and I clapped along with everyone else.

The rush of being in front of the whole school carried me into the dance. As soon as I got in the door, Astrid ran up to me. She was wearing a sparkly, poofy dress, while everyone else was wearing something tight and sexy.

“You look so beautiful. You’re like a real-life princess!” Astrid said.

I pet her hair. “You’re too sweet.”

“Let’s take a picture together!” Astrid pushed her phone into a boy’s hands and hugged me tight around the middle. The boy, confused but compliant, snapped a picture of us. “This is so cute! I’m going to post it right now,” Astrid said.

Ari and Mikayla yelled for me to catch up, saving me from more of Astrid's praise. I ran after them and found myself on the dance floor. I shimmied with Ari and Mikayla until the gym got too hot and sweaty to be enjoyable.

"Let's get out of here," Ari said.

"But we're not allowed to leave early," I said. There was still an hour left before the dance was over.

Mikayla pointed to a door tucked in the corner of the gym. "Mr. Lo's on bouncer duty. We can get past him. We're his favorites." Before I could argue, Ari and Mikayla sprung on Mr. Lo. I crept up behind them as inconspicuously as possible in my floor length dress.

"Hey, Mr. Lo," Ari said.

"It's us, your favorites."

"Good evening. Congrats on the win, Ari." Mr. Lo looked young, maybe thirty at the oldest, though it was hard to tell with Asian men. He still had the sheepish charm of a young boy. He didn't spark any excitement in me, but I understood why people called him the hottest teacher in the school.

"Considering that Ari is officially king, do you think you could let us slip out a wee bit early?" Mikayla asked.

"No one leaves until the dance is over, sorry."

"C'mon," Ari said. "If you let us leave, we won't tell Principal Kelly you spend half of every period just chatting with the class."

Mr. Lo rubbed the back of his neck. There was that sheepish charm peeking through. "It's not half the class. It's ten minutes at most."

“Just let us go, Mr. Lo. Bend the rules a little bit for your favorites.” Mikayla probably started calling herself and Ari Mr. Lo’s favorite students without any evidence of it being true, but he did look amused.

“Fine,” he said. “Just be subtle.” We all whispered thank you as we ducked out the door.

We emerged into the parking lot, where the sound of the dance faded and night took over. The cold air bit my exposed arms. There was only one other person in the lot: a shadowy figure smoking a cigarette next to a bright red jeep. Ms. Ohara.

“Shit,” she muttered. “You guys aren’t supposed to be out here yet.”

“And you’re not supposed to smoke on school property,” Mikayla said.

Ms. Ohara raised her cigarette in defeat and took another drag. “I won’t tell if you don’t. Where are you headed?”

“My house,” Ari said.

“To hang out.” I cut him off before he could spill any incriminating details about the party, like he had with Mikayla’s mom.

“Who’s picking you up?”

“It’s only a fifteen-minute walk,” Ari said.

“In this weather? Ari, you’re the only one with a jacket.” Ms. Ohara placed the back of her hand on my arm. “Juno’s already freezing.”

“I’m okay,” I said, but I was starting to shiver.

Ms. Ohara flung her car door open. “Get in. It’s your royal carriage.” Ari didn’t need more convincing. He jumped into the front seat.

Mikayla glanced at me. “Do you want to do this?”

Mikayla didn’t know that I’d been in Ms. Ohara’s car before. “Beats walking.”

Mikayla sighed, defeated, and climbed in the backseat with me. The car was warm, and the smell brought me back to that day at the mall. I didn't tell anyone about it because I was embarrassed that Ms. Ohara had to buy me a dress, but there was another reason. I didn't want people to get the wrong idea about me and Ms. Ohara. The trip to the mall was innocent, but without context someone might think it was a date. I could imagine Mikayla giving me a judgmental look and asking why I was leaving campus with a teacher. Or, even worse, I could hear Ari complaining that he wasn't invited. If I didn't tell anyone about the mall trip, it would remain something sacred between me and Ms. Ohara.

"My parents are on a mission trip," Ari said as we pulled up to his house. "Spreading the word of the lord and fighting homosexuality."

Ms. Ohara shook her head. "I'm sorry, Ari." She'd heard plenty about Ari's parents.

"Don't be. They're gone. Want to come inside? Just for a hot second." Mikayla cast a sideways glance at me. I shrugged. I was tired of reigning Ari in, and I didn't want Ms. Ohara to leave yet.

"I don't know," Ms. Ohara said.

"Please? I'll give you a tour of all the crosses."

Ms. Ohara's face softened a bit. "Fine. The more gay people in the house the better, right?"

As we walked up the path, Mikayla held me behind.

"This is kind of weird, right? Why did Ari invite her to come in?"

"Let's just go." I followed Ari and Ms. Ohara into the house.

Ari gave Ms. Ohara the full tour while we followed along, pointing out crosses everywhere—above the kitchen sink, framed on the wall, and even one across from the toilet. “In case you need support from Jesus while you shit,” he said.

He led us into his room to see the final cross hanging in a collage of papers on the wall next to his bed. It was a crude crayon drawing of a half-naked Jesus flexing his abs on the cross.

“I drew this when I was seven. My parents thought it was so sweet. This is the only way they’d let me have a sexy man on my wall.”

“They don’t suspect your sexuality at all?” Ms. Ohara laughed.

“Not one bit.” Ari scooted his computer monitor aside, revealing a blue napkin taped to the wall behind it. The napkin was embossed with gold letters that read *Danielle and Kristen, June 10, 2018*. “This is from your wedding, Ohara. I have to keep it hidden because it has two girl names. My parents would be scandalized.”

“Oh,” she said.

“I kind of stole it, but you were just going to throw it away anyway.”

“Where’s the bathroom again?” Ms. Ohara asked. “I think I’ll use it before I go.”

“Down the hall to your right,” Ari said. He probably wanted Ms. Ohara to be impressed with him for keeping the napkin despite the risk.

As soon as Ms. Ohara was in the bathroom, Mikayla spoke up. “I’m going to set the cups out. People will be here soon.”

“Chill, we have another half hour. No one’s going to show up on time,” Ari said.

Mikayla rolled her eyes. “Whatever. Just make sure Ms. Ohara leaves before anyone gets here.”

Ari and Mikayla went to the kitchen to start setting up. I stayed in Ari's room, grabbing the change of clothes I'd stashed there earlier. I felt ridiculous wearing a ballgown inside the house. I was stuffing my dress back in its oversized bag when the door opened.

"Geez Ari, knock next time. I could be naked."

"Sorry," Ms. Ohara said.

"Oh, shit. I thought you were Ari." He was nowhere to be seen. "Did you need something?"

"Can you keep a secret?"

"Of course I can." I held up the red dress. "I didn't tell anyone about this."

She looked at me with curiosity. "I never asked you to keep that secret."

"I know. I just thought it would be better to." I was worried suddenly. Did keeping our mall trip secret imply that it was shameful? But who would I have told? My parents? Ari and Mikayla? Seeing Ms. Ohara outside of school was something special. I wanted to keep it between us.

"I suppose you're right," she said, shutting the door behind her. She walked over to Ari's collage, keeping her footsteps soft, and plucked her wedding napkin off the wall. "If Ari asks, can you say someone else stole this?"

I nodded. "Why?"

"It's not worth him getting in trouble with his parents. It's better if they never find out about the wedding."

"Is that the only reason?" I wasn't usually so bold, but I could sense something was off. I'd found a crack in Ms. Ohara's impenetrable confidence, and I wanted to dig further.

"What?"

“Is that the only reason?” I repeated.

“I guess you deserve to know.”

“What is it?”

“I can’t tell you tonight. It would take too long. I think we should make an evening of it.”

She smiled, but it didn’t reach her eyes. Before I could ask her any more questions, she slipped out the door. Through Ari’s window, I heard her jeep roar to life and drive away.

Ms. Ohara was always mysterious. There were things that made her switch from warm to cold without warning. I might finally start to understand her with this new secret, and best of all she saw it fit to tell *me*.

A few minutes later, the doorbell rang. I ran out to find Astrid and her three friends at the door talking to Ari and Mikayla.

“What the hell,” Ari said. “You guys are too young to drink.”

“So are you,” Astrid said.

“That’s different. Seventeen is when you’re supposed to start breaking the law,” Ari said.

“Don’t worry,” Mikayla said. “I made them promise they won’t drink. They’re just here to watch.”

The four girls placed one hand over their hearts and held the other up. “We swear not to drink.”

I clapped. “They learned a whole routine. We can’t send them away.”

Ari finally agreed to let them stay, and we had our hands full monitoring them as they took turns trying on his crown. Before long, the house was full of drama kids and Mikayla’s old popular friends, and people were asking for shots with the Homecoming royalty left and right.

The room was spinning by the time I realized I was drunk for the first time in my life, and having a good time.

I woke up the next morning on the floor of Ari's bedroom. The last thing I remembered was puking behind the bushes in the backyard.

Mikayla was picking up in the kitchen when I came out.

"Here," she said, sliding me a solo cup full of water and a plain piece of toast. "Have fun last night?"

"I think so. My memory is a little foggy."

"That's how you know you had a good time. I drank enough to make out with a guy who played a Nazi in *The Sound of Music*, but not enough to forget. Big mistake."

I took a bite of the toast, and my stomach settled from a roiling disaster to a manageable pain. "Isn't that the whole point of parties? Get messy drunk and kiss someone?"

"Who did you kiss?" Mikayla asked.

I scanned my memories. There was a lot of stumbling, laughing, and talking too loudly to people I didn't know, but I couldn't remember getting remotely close to anyone's face. "No one, I think."

"When are you going to get some action? I've never heard you talk about liking anyone."

"I guess I'm picky. High school guys don't exactly have me foaming at the mouth."

"What about high school girls?" Mikayla smirked.

"Do I look like a lesbian? I'm not one. I barely even had female friends before this year."

"Why not?"

“Girls make me nervous. They’re too judgmental. I get so in my head about whether they hate me or not.”

Mikayla leaned forward and pushed her boobs out. “I’m a girl and we’re friends. Are you into me?”

I laughed. “No way. You’re too wild for me. Besides, you’re super straight.”

“I guess. What about Ohara? She likes women. Does she get you going?”

“She’s a teacher.”

“Good. I’m glad you know that. People love to pretend she isn’t a teacher.”

“Are you still mad that Ari invited her in? It wasn’t a big deal. He just needs a gay role model he can make fun of his parents with.”

Mikayla rolled her eyes. “What he really needs is to stop chasing straight guys.”

“What do you mean?”

“You don’t know? He’s been in love with Kieran Walsh like all year, even though he’s the straightest guy on the planet.”

Kieran, the smelly football player? “Ew, he’s gross. I had no idea Ari had a crush on him. Why didn’t he tell me?”

“I guess he wanted to keep it between me and him. Don’t tell him I let it slip.” I should’ve felt more hurt that Ari didn’t confide in me, but I didn’t mind him and Mikayla being close when I had Ms. Ohara.

Another piece of toast popped out of the toaster and Mikayla dropped it on my plate. “Eat more. You’ve had a long night.”

Once I recovered slightly, I lugged my giant red dress half a mile back to my house. It was just past 8:00am, and the sunlight and birdsong felt like hell. The aroma of coffee drifted

outside my front door, which meant at least one of my parents was awake. Hopefully just Dad. He wouldn't strike up conversation. My goal was to get to my room and back to sleep as fast as possible.

"Juno?" Mom called from the kitchen as I opened the door. I was done for.

"Yes?" I popped in the doorway, trying extra hard to hold my eyelids open. Mom was in her robe and slippers.

"Did you have a good sleepover?"

"Yup."

"You look tired."

"It was a long day."

"Enjoy yourself?"

"Yeah. Ari won King, so that was nice."

"Oh, good for him. Who was queen?"

"One of the cheerleaders. Figures."

"Sure." She took a sip of her coffee. If she was silent for one more second, I would've taken the chance to run. "You know Juno..."

"What?"

"I never thought you'd be part of that Homecoming stuff. Popularity doesn't seem to suit you."

"Thanks," I said flatly. She didn't acknowledge my sarcasm.

"People don't usually like a smart girl. When you know too much, it can come off as very negative. I was always worried you were scaring everyone away." She took another sip.

“Why would you say that?” The old me would’ve said nothing and retreated to my room, but I felt bold. I had the dress in my hands—proof that I was a Homecoming princess, and that at least one person cared about me.

“What do you mean?” Mom asked.

“Why would you say mean things about me? People at school like me. They say hi to me in the halls now.”

“Well, that’s great honey. I wasn’t trying to be mean. I just never thought you’d be the Homecoming type.”

“What if I am, Mom? What if other people can see great things in me?”

“Then that’s wonderful.”

“Why don’t you just say, ‘there are great things in you, Juno.’ Is that so hard?” My head was pounding, and I could barely control what I was saying.

“Why are you raising your voice at me?”

“I’m not,” I said, but I could suddenly hear how loud I’d gotten.

“What’s gotten into you? You’ve never argued like this. Has the popularity gone to your head?” She laughed a little, like it was hilarious to think that I could ever be popular.

“Some people think I deserve the world, and not because I’m popular. They see me.”

“Good. I don’t see why that means you have to shout at me.” She didn’t ask me who I was talking about, and I was surprised at my own disappointment. Maybe if she knew how I’d gotten this dress she’d be shocked into caring. Still, I held my tongue. If she didn’t care enough to ask, I might as well do what I wanted right under her nose.

CHAPTER SEVEN

“Do you have plans on Saturday?” Ms. Ohara asked during my TA period. It was November, a couple weeks after Homecoming.

“Just working on college apps. Early decision is due next week.”

“You’re still set on Princeton?”

“It’s an incredible school.”

“Of course it is, but there are dozens of other universities where you could be just as happy. Open yourself up to the possibilities.” Ms. Ohara had been trying to change my mind since she found out I was applying early decision. She thought I only wanted to go to Princeton because my mom went there.

I loved the story: my mom always assumed she’d work in her parents’ restaurant for the rest of her life, like a typical Chinese daughter of her generation, but a teacher convinced her to apply to college and she ended up at Princeton. She said the people there were more brilliant and talented than she knew was possible. I wanted to experience that for myself. My obsession with Princeton wasn’t just vanity like Ms. Ohara seemed to think.

“I can think about other universities if I don’t get into Princeton.”

Ms. Ohara rolled her eyes, but let the subject go. “If you have time to spare from your application, I’d like to take you on an outing.”

“An outing? What does that mean?”

“It’s more fun if it’s a surprise.”

“I’m just supposed to agree to this even though I have no idea what it is?”

“Yes,” Ms. Ohara said with a playful smile. She knew she had me. I would never refuse a hang out with her.

“You drive a hard bargain, but I accept.”

“Perfect. Dress warm.”

Ms. Ohara picked me up at 4:30pm on Saturday. I slipped out while Mom was cooking our meals for the week and Dad was pulling weeds in the backyard. I hadn’t had a full conversation with Mom since Homecoming, but I don’t think she noticed. It was normal for us to go days with only small talk.

I walked over to the side of the house, where Ms. Ohara had parked once again, and pulled myself into the front seat. “Where are we going?”

“Trust me, will you?”

“What am I supposed to tell my parents?” I asked with exaggerated drama. Instead of laughing, Ms. Ohara looked concerned.

“What *did* you tell them?”

“Nothing. They don’t care.”

“At all?”

“No, not like that. They’re good to me. They just value my independence. Way better than helicopter parents, honestly. I should probably be more grateful.”

“Well,” she said, “they’re very lucky to have a daughter like you.”

“Yup. Goody two shoes are easy to raise.”

“Not just that. You’re bright and driven, and sometimes you’re even funny.” I looked away to hide the flush on my cheeks. Ms. Ohara gave me more compliments than anyone I’d ever known.

“Are you trying to adopt me?”

Ms. Ohara made a disgusted face. “Of course not. Do I look that old to you?”

“Definitely not.” Ms. Ohara had never felt like a parent to me. You didn’t feel excited at the thought of being alone in a car with your mother.

“So, we’re headed south,” I said as we got on the freeway. “What’s down there? Los Gatos? Are you going to make me eat at a fancy rich people restaurant?”

Ms. Ohara laughed at me. “We don’t exactly live in a poor area ourselves.”

“Yeah, but Los Gatos is different. They have huge houses down there, like castles. Our houses might be expensive but they’re tiny.”

“You have a funny perspective. You wouldn’t last a minute in a real run-down neighborhood.”

I shrugged. “Maybe not. Are you taking me to one? To teach me a lesson?”

“Stop guessing.”

“We’re going to a quaker meeting, and you’re planning on converting me to the faith. No? Maybe you’re going to take me into the woods and dump me where no one can find me.”

“Maybe I will, if you keep this up.”

I smiled. I knew she was amused by my insistence. “Maybe we *are* going to Los Gatos. We have reservations for a romantic candlelit dinner.”

“This is not a date,” she said sharply, her playfulness gone. “I would never take you on a date. If you thought—”

“It’s okay. I was just kidding.” There was tense silence between us. “I’m sorry. I know you would never do that. I wouldn’t be in the car with you if I thought you would. It was a joke.” I thought it was clear that Ms. Ohara would never try to make things romantic between us. I didn’t realize we had to tiptoe around the concept entirely.

“So, it is a quaker meeting then?” I asked.

Ms. Ohara laughed, and things were normal again.

We drove straight past Los Gatos, and the place where Ms. Ohara had her wedding. She turned onto the highway that led south through the redwood covered mountains.

“We’re going to the beach?” I asked.

“Can’t say,” she said, but her smile told me I was right.

Half an hour later we emerged in Santa Cruz. The sun dipped low as we sped down the highway along the cliffside. She pulled off the road onto a rough patch of dirt.

The air was cold and wet off the ocean. Ms. Ohara pulled a bundle wrapped in gingham out of her trunk. “Let’s go,” she said.

I followed her through a tight path winding down to the water. The dirt was loose under my feet, and every few seconds she glanced back to make sure I was still steady. I imagined the ground giving way, sending me skidding into her outstretched arms, but I made it all the way down without incident.

We arrived at a tiny beach formed out of a divot in the cliffside, with a mix of tan and black sand that sparkled in the golden light of the weakening sun. Glowing orange rock jutted into the water on either side, cradling the waves. The cove was deserted.

“We barely made sunset,” Ms. Ohara said. She unwrapped the gingham blanket and laid it on the sand, revealing a picnic basket underneath. The one we’d gotten her for the wedding.

“The basket,” I said.

“This is the first chance I’ve had to use it.” She patted the spot beside her on the blanket.

I sat down. “Juno, I want to be totally honest with you. Is that okay?”

I nodded. Her sincerity caught me off guard.

She stared out at the waves rushing towards us, slinking away, then tumbling forward again. “You remind me of me at your age: stubborn, opinionated, waiting for high school to end and life to start.”

“Hey,” I said, pretending to sound offended.

“Let me finish. I wish I could teach you everything I’ve learned and save you ten years’ worth of mistakes, but I don’t think life works like that. Recently, I realized real teaching is impossible. You can only prepare someone to learn by themselves. So really, it’s better to be a friend than a teacher if you really care about someone. Right?”

I wasn’t sure I knew what she was talking about, but if I didn’t agree she might stop, and I needed to hear more.

“You know,” she continued. “If I was a man, I couldn’t have you as my TA. I like you too much. But I’m glad we can have this friendship.”

Would the people who knew Ms. Ohara was a lesbian view her the same as a man? Would they get the wrong idea about our friendship? Ms. Ohara had made it clear to me at least that she didn’t want our relationship to be romantic. That must have been why she was so harsh in the car when I joked about us going on a date: if she was going to be completely honest with me, like she was now and like I hoped she would be forever, it was up to me to not take her meaning the wrong way.

“I need to tell you something,” she said. “I didn’t want my students knowing, but it feels wrong to keep it from you.” Ms. Ohara sighed. She looked strange. I realized she was scared. “Kristen and I are no longer together.”

Moments flashed through my mind: Ms. Ohara falling silent when marriage was mentioned, plucking the napkin off Ari’s wall, opening the door on the first day of school with bright pink hair. Her hair was grown out now and faded to a pale peach. Girls often came to school with a new hair color or bangs after a breakup. It was an impulsive way to feel alive again after a piece of you was severed. Could Ms. Ohara have such wild emotions too? She seemed younger than usual here on the beach.

“What happened?” I asked.

“She left five days after the wedding. We were still at home because she’d insisted that we have a break between the wedding and the honeymoon. Her doubts were so strong she planned for them. She didn’t even sign the marriage certificate, so it would be easier if she decided to leave. We were never even married.”

“Why did she agree to the wedding?” I asked. It was all I could do. This kind of pain was beyond my depth. I hadn’t even had my first kiss.

“She thought it might change something. Of course, it didn’t. If she didn’t love me before we vowed to be with each other forever in a giant sham that cost thousands of dollars, there was no way she would love me after.”

“How could she not love you?”

Ms. Ohara looked at me, her face taut. “It’s very, very easy not to love me.”

“No,” I said. “I don’t believe that. You’ve been so kind to me. You’ve done things for me that I didn’t even know I could ask for. How could she just leave you?”

“It’s good to hear that Juno, but there are things you could never understand about me.” Her words stung. I couldn’t know Ms. Ohara as well as the woman who was supposed to be her wife, but still I felt the urge to dive deeper into her, explore every corner.

“Kristen said I wouldn’t let her in,” Ms. Ohara continued. “She said when she proposed and I said yes—because I really, really wanted to marry her—she thought I would start relying on her more than I relied on myself. But I didn’t. I’m just a cold-hearted bitch who doesn’t know how to love.”

“That’s not true,” I said. I felt strangely protective of Ms. Ohara, though she was ten years my senior. “I think you love fiercely. You’ve gotten me to open up more than I ever thought was possible. It takes love to achieve that.”

Ms. Ohara gave me a smile. Two tracks of tears ran down her face and reflected gold in the sunset. “I’ve been trying to be an open person. Not for Kristen, but for me.”

“It’s working. You’re the one person I feel like I can really talk to. Ms. Ohara, you’re—” I paused. I was about to say something I’d never admitted before, not even to myself. “You’re my best friend.”

Ms. Ohara stared at me, shocked. She blinked a few times, and her face grew distant in thought. “You know, when I told everyone that Kristen and I split, they were so nice to me. All my bridesmaids, my colleagues, my family—they tiptoed around me. I hated it. I knew they were wondering what could’ve been so wrong with me to make her leave. I could see it in their faces. Curiosity and pity mixed together. It was awful.” The sun dipped into the water. The sky was spattered with deep pink clouds, bathing everything in a rosy haze. “I guess what I’m saying is, as crazy as this sounds, I think you might be my best friend, too.”

I thought my affection for Ms. Ohara would always be one-sided. She was an adult. She had to have so many people in her life who were better than me. But here we were on the beach at sunset, sharing an intimacy that was so intense I knew it had to be rare. For the first time, I realized Ms. Ohara was just as lonely as I was.

Neither of us spoke as the last sliver of glowing sun slipped under the ocean.

“Thank you for telling me,” I said finally.

“Thank you for listening. I don’t know if I’ll ever heal from this completely, but I’m more hopeful now.” She wiped her face with the sleeve of her jacket and smiled at me. “It’s a bit dark to eat now, but you could try a bite.”

She undid the latch of the picnic basket and pulled it open, revealing a delicate set of plates strapped to the lid and white bread sandwiches cut into small rectangles stacked inside.

I took a sandwich filled with cream and cut strawberries. As I bit down, I tried to imprint the moment in my memory. The sweet juice spilling between my teeth, the gentle roar of the waves, the sky darkening to a sleepy purple.

“Can I call you Danielle from now on?” I asked.

She laughed. “Of course. It’s about time.”

“Well, Danielle, thank you for a perfect evening.” I wanted to put my arm around her, but I hesitated. Would she take it the wrong way? Would she think I was trying to make a move? But no—we’d agreed we were best friends, and best friends could hold one another.

I put my arm around her shoulder and she leaned her head into mine, and we stayed like that for a long time as the night fell around us.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Mom and Dad were both at work when I opened my decision letter from Princeton. I scanned for *congrats, admitted, accepted*, but there was nothing. My vision was blurry with tears before I could finish reading the letter. Eventually, I saw it. *Deferred*. Neither accepted nor rejected. I felt a huge flood of relief.

“Did you get in?” Mom asked when she came home three hours later.

“No, I was deferred.”

Mom rubbed my shoulder. “Aw honey, I’m sorry.”

I brushed her hand off. “Deferred doesn’t mean rejected. I still have a chance.”

“I suppose so,” Mom said. “What happens now?”

“People online said I should write a letter letting the university know I’m still interested. I won’t hear back again until March.” I had to do all my own research about college. My high school assumed everyone had intense parents pressuring them to get into a good school, so they left us to deal with the admissions process on our own. That assumption was correct for 99% of students; my parents were an anomaly. They trusted that I would work everything out by myself. A bunch of my classmates would kill to change places with me, but it was hard to be grateful without an acceptance letter.

“March is a long way away. Will you apply to other schools?”

“Of course. I already have the applications ready. None of them are as good as this one though.” I had Danielle edit my essay for Princeton, a service she usually charged a lot of money for.

“My coworker was talking about how her son is going to Northwestern. Maybe that could be a good safety school for you.”

“It’s one of the top ten schools in the country. I don’t know if that’s a safety.”

“Sorry,” Mom said, sinking into the chair across from me. “I don’t know much about universities. My high school was so bad they didn’t bother telling us about fancy colleges.”

“How’d you end up going to Princeton then?” I’d heard the story before, but I wanted to hear it again.

“I had a math teacher who convinced me to apply. She handled all the logistics. I had no idea what the process was, and my parents couldn’t even read enough English to complete the financial aid forms by themselves.”

“You’re lucky you had a teacher like that.”

“Everyone else at the school was absolutely shocked when I got into Princeton. They ran a story about me in the local newspaper. My parents didn’t realize it was a big deal until they saw my picture in the paper. After that, they started bragging to everyone.”

“What was it like on the East Coast? Was everything different?” This was the question I always asked my mom about college. She’d grown up in the Bay Area too.

“Everyone at Princeton was the best in their field, whether they were into art or academics or politics. It was completely new for me. Like I said, my high school awful. Nothing like yours. You have tons of talented people in your classes, and good teachers. It’s not as hard for you as it was for me.”

And yet my mom was accepted to Princeton, and I was deferred. Sometimes I wished I'd grown up like her, a diamond in the rough, instead of fighting to stand out in a field of desperate kids. I always pushed that thought away—it was a bratty and privileged point of view—but I couldn't help dreaming about getting into Princeton in the same way that she had.

“I want to go to an Ivy like you. It sounds incredible.”

Mom shrugged. “Maybe. Princeton is the only university I've ever studied at. Lots of colleges could be the same for all I know, and the ones in California are certainly cheaper. I got lots of scholarship money back in the day, but we won't qualify for much aid now.”

“I'll apply to some California schools as a backup,” I said, though I knew I had to get out of the state. If I got into a good enough school on the East Coast then my parents would have to pay for me to go there, and my life could really begin.

* * *

Winter wore on. The last college applications were due in January. Ari wanted to be a musical theater major and was constantly talking about his next audition. Mikayla was realistic, applying to public schools and not much else. Danielle almost seemed happy that I didn't get into Princeton. She was ready with a list of alternate colleges. Everyone else at school became even more insufferable than normal. The tension in the air was palatable; asking where someone was applying was like tossing a lit match into a room full of bombs. I spent more and more time in Danielle's room to escape.

Outside of school, Danielle and I started our own private rituals. Every Wednesday we tried a new pancake place for breakfast. We always left early in the morning and got to campus at least an hour before school started, when we could walk through the deserted halls in peace.

My parents didn't ask any questions. My mom was grateful for one less morning where she had to drive me to school.

Danielle showed me her apartment one day after dinner with Ari. It was a one-bedroom, with the kitchen and dining area shoved into a glorified hallway and a living room at the end that wasn't even big enough for a full couch. Somehow though, in her Danielle way, she made it cozy. We spent many nights there talking about anything and everything. I always stretched out on the loveseat, and she took the brown recliner across the coffee table. Before long, I memorized the cracks in her ceiling.

On my eighteenth birthday in February, Danielle took me, Ari, and Mikayla into San Francisco. Mikayla didn't always like to come on our outings, but she couldn't say no for my birthday. We got dinner in Chinatown and walked along the pier. I sent my parents a picture of me, Ari, and Mikayla with the bay in the background, knowing they wouldn't think to ask who took it. At the end of the night, after dropping off Ari and Mikayla, Danielle turned to me in the passenger seat.

"Did you want to..."

"Can we go to your apartment?" I asked.

She smiled. "I thought you'd never ask."

I pulled my shoes off at the door and set them in the spot on the shoe rack that was always open for me.

"I'm going to get a glass of water," I said, opening the cupboards. There was a dark bottle of alcohol on the top shelf. I got on my tip toes and pulled it down. "What's this?"

"Whiskey."

"Planning a party?"

“A woman is allowed to drink every once in a while.” She grabbed the bottle, but I didn’t let go.

“I’ve never tried whiskey before,” I said.

“Good. You’d hate it.”

“Are you sure?” I pulled the bottle, with her hand still attached, closer to me. “Can I try it? To celebrate adulthood?”

She scoffed. I knew she was amused by my antics. “You’re too bold.”

“I wasn’t always this way. I blame you.” I pulled a glass off the shelf and poured a bit of whiskey inside. She pulled her own glass down.

“I’ll do it with you. Trust me, you don’t want to do it alone.”

We clinked our glasses and I dumped the whiskey into my mouth. It tasted like gasoline, and I was immediately desperate to get it off my tongue. It took me a full second of panic to remember how to swallow.

Danielle filled her cup with water and shoved it into my hands. The water washed away enough of the taste that I could function again, but the disgusting remnants stuck in my mouth.

“Still curious about whiskey?” she asked.

“That was torture. Why the hell do you drink that?”

She poured herself another shot and tipped it down her throat.

“You get used to it.”

It was midnight when I took my usual spot on the loveseat. I’d already texted my mom I’d be home late, and she was probably asleep by now. Danielle stretched out on the recliner. Her cheeks were tinged pink. She’d had one more shot of whiskey before putting it back on the top shelf.

The warmth of the whiskey spread from my belly out to my limbs, making me feel weightless. My thoughts slid over one another easily. I understood why people went to bars to find hookups. I could imagine myself a few years down the line meeting Danielle at a bar, her buying me a drink, and our conversation slipping into something more intimate. Just a lingering touch, and then drawing closer together, and our lips—I jolted myself out of the thought. My imagination had never felt so strong, like a vortex that could pull me somewhere I didn't want to go.

I felt tingly all over from the thought of kissing a woman. Maybe Mikayla was right, I was a lesbian. But no, it wasn't just any woman I was thinking of—it was Danielle, which meant I had to stop. I was barely eighteen and she was almost thirty; that was the reality we lived in. I was lucky to even be her friend.

“What are you thinking about?” Danielle asked.

“Nothing,” I said quickly. “Just processing things. Adulthood is scary.”

“It is, but you don't need to worry about that yet.”

“I'm eighteen.” I knew what being eighteen meant. One of the reasons Danielle and I couldn't be more than friends had snapped. There were still many other reasons—I was still a student after all—but the disappearance of one barrier made me aware that someday all the barriers would be gone.

“Eighteen is not an adult,” Danielle said. “You've never had your own apartment. You've never had a full-time job. You've never been truly alone without your parents.”

Each word was like a blow pushing me back in my place, far below Danielle. “So when am I a real adult?”

“It varies for everyone. I’d say not until after college. I didn’t feel like an adult until I became a teacher.”

After college was over four years from now. A long, long time. I decided that any part of me that hoped for something more with Danielle would have to be gone by the time I sobered up.

“I have a question for you. Who’s your favorite student of all time?” If I was a child in her eyes, I at least wanted to be her favorite child.

“That’s a hard question. I’ve been teaching for five years. I’ve had a lot of students,” she said. She didn’t give compliments away easily anymore.

“It’s my birthday, and I’d like to know.”

“It’s 12:23am. Not your birthday.”

“Fine. What about a top three then?”

“Top ten?” she asked.

“We’re going to be here all night. Five. Final offer.”

“Okay, okay,” she laughed. “You’re a tough bargainer. For number five I’ll have to say... Ari. Don’t tell him he’s only number five, he’ll be mad.”

“Our secret,” I said, smiling. We had too many secrets to count now.

“Number four is a controversial pick. I’m going to say Astrid. She’s so sweet, and we have three more years together. I could see us bonding a lot more in the future.”

“Fine. I guess not everyone is lucky enough to meet you that early.”

Ms. Ohara met my eyes, her smile growing sadder for a second. I could count the number of months before graduation on one hand.

“Let’s keep moving,” I said. “Who’s three?”

“Three would probably be Anna. You don’t know her. She was in the first class I ever taught by myself. Number two has to be Beth. I also met her when she was a freshman.”

“Interesting,” I said. Though I’d started the conversation, I didn’t love hearing about all the other people Danielle had cared about before me. I only had one year with her here. It was possible she was going to forget all about me once I left. “Did Beth ever come to your apartment?”

“No. You’re the only one.”

I instantly felt better. “Who’s your number one?” I asked.

“I don’t know. Good question.”

“Come on, just say it.”

“Gosh, I think there might not be anyone for number one. Maybe we can just move everyone up a spot.”

“Really? There’s absolutely no one?”

“Oh, wait.” Danielle’s face lit up, as if realizing something for the first time. “I think it might be... you?”

“I don’t believe you.” I wanted to hear her say it again.

Danielle sat up in her chair, leaning towards me. Her eyes were sharp, and she’d suddenly grown serious. “Juno. You are my favorite student of all time.”

I was embarrassed by how happy that made me.

* * *

“A toast to Ohara’s twenty second birthday,” Ari said, holding out a glass of water. Danielle’s birthday was a month after mine, and she was treating me, Ari, and Mikayla to sushi to celebrate.

“You don’t need to do that. Twenty-eight is not shamefully old,” I said.

Danielle clinked her water glass with Ari. She never drank alcohol when Ari and Mikayla were around. “I agree, but I’ll toast to anything.”

“Can we eat now?” Mikayla asked.

“Please do.” Danielle picked up a piece of nigiri with her chopsticks and we all followed suit. This was a high-quality sushi place, half an hour drive from where we lived. We rarely went to restaurants near the school.

“Have you talked to Beth recently?” Ari asked through a mouthful of fish.

“We had coffee over winter break,” Danielle said. I felt a flair of jealousy, but I pushed it away. I knew I was Danielle’s number one.

“Did she tell you what she heard about Chelsea?”

“Who?”

Mikayla interjected. “Chelsea graduated last year. Everyone knew her because she was third on that list of the hottest girls in school in the boy’s bathroom.” Mikayla and Ari had clearly planned to bring this up together. They were each other’s confidantes now.

“That list was an administrative headache,” Danielle said.

Ari waved his hand. He didn’t want the subject to change. “Okay, yes, third hottest girl in school. Did Beth mention Chelsea to you?”

“No.” Danielle was getting annoyed. I could hear it.

“Oh, interesting.” Ari shoved another piece of sushi in his mouth. He wanted the information to be teased out of him.

“What did she say?” I asked.

“People saw Chelsea going into Mr. Lo’s apartment, alone,” Ari said. He was gratuitously excited. Danielle’s face went tight as she retreated into her thoughts. Ari was selfish to bring this up when we were supposed to be celebrating her.

“Who saw Chelsea? How do they even know where Mr. Lo lives?” I let an aggressive edge come into my voice. If Ari was wrong, he was spreading serious rumors.

“Beth heard from two girls in her year,” Mikayla answered for Ari. “And they knew where he lives because the volleyball team has dinner at his house every year before their last game of the season.”

“I didn’t know that,” I said.

“You don’t know a lot of things,” Ari said, smug.

“No one really talks about it,” Mikayla said. “It’s not a secret per say, but it’s not something the volleyball girls brag about all the time.”

“If students are already going to his house, why is it so weird that people saw Chelsea there?” I asked.

“She’s not a student anymore, and she was alone. She was Mr. Lo’s TA last year. People said they were super close.” Mikayla said. No one was acknowledging our own situation, out at dinner for Danielle’s birthday. Then again, Ari and Mikayla didn’t know I’d been to Danielle’s apartment.

“I used to like Mr. Lo, but not so much anymore,” Ari said.

“Same,” Mikayla agreed. “He barely even teaches. He spends so much time talking about mental health and basically begs us to confide in him if we’re ever struggling with academic pressure. I’m definitely going to fail the AP exam.” I remembered Mikayla buttering up Mr. Lo

at the Homecoming dance, insisting she was his favorite. When had she flipped? Was a student visiting his apartment alone enough to change her whole perception of him?

Danielle cleared her throat. “Why are you telling me this? Do you want me to talk to Principal Kelly?”

“No,” Ari said, sheepish. “It’s not that serious. I was just making conversation.” He was obviously hoping Danielle would swoop in with some insider knowledge. He couldn’t read when she would be his friend and when she would be a teacher.

“Mikayla, do you want me to report this?” Danielle asked.

Mikayla looked at Ari, who shook his head slightly. “I guess not,” she said. “It’s just something people are saying, but there’s nothing illegal about having a student at your house. And she’s already graduated.”

“Okay,” Danielle said. She was trying to sound authoritative, but I caught a tone of relief in her voice. “Let’s continue enjoying dinner, then.”

We ate more sushi than I thought was possible. I was in a post-meal haze when we got up to leave and a familiar voice called out behind me.

“Juno!” Astrid said. I turned just in time for her to barrel into me. I hugged her back instinctually. She pulled away and got a good look at all four of us, dressed up for the special occasion. “What are you doing here?”

“Just getting dinner,” I said.

“Me too, I’m with my family.” Astrid gestured to a table at the back of the restaurant. Her parents were still preoccupied with gathering their things, but her older sister was staring at us. I recognized her. Her name was Tara, and she was a senior like me, though we’d never spoken. Her mouth was sinking into a frown.

“Look, we’ve got to go, but I’ll see you on Monday,” I said. Astrid’s face fell a little.

“Oh, okay.” She waved to all of us. “Bye. It’s good to see you!” Behind her, Tara kept staring. What would she see when she looked at us? Friends having dinner together, or a teacher and her students who were all too close? Maybe we were both. The distinction only mattered when other people were looking.

“Let’s go,” I said, pushing out the door. Danielle lingered a moment inside, staring back at Tara.

I was laid out on the loveseat again, Danielle on the recliner. We’d dropped Ari and Mikayla off before coming back to her apartment.

“Do you know anything about this Chelsea situation?” Danielle asked.

“No. Ari doesn’t talk to me.”

“Hm.” She stayed silent for a second. “Maybe I should’ve said more. I wasn’t sure what to do.”

“You’re fine. Ari was looking for gossip.”

“Oh really?” She rarely said anything bad about Ari herself, but she knew how to draw complaints out of me.

“He just wants to know more information than everyone else does. It’s a bit pathetic.”

“You’re being harsh. Wanting to feel like you know what’s going on in your world is normal. I think that’s what everyone your age wants.”

I hated when she talked about people ‘my age.’

“Fine,” I said. “That’s just further proof that Ari doesn’t actually care about Chelsea’s wellbeing. He probably hopes they’re dating, just because it would be juicier.”

“What do you think is happening between Chelsea and Mr. Lo?” Danielle asked.

“Nothing, probably. I come to your apartment all the time, but we’re just friends. We shouldn’t be making assumptions.”

“Our situation is less common than the alternative though.”

“Is it really? I’ve never heard of a teacher and student dating in real life.”

“You’re lucky. It certainly happens. I hear stories all the time. If that is what’s happening, Mr. Lo might feel protected by the fact that Chelsea graduated.”

“Even if she’s not a student, she’s not really an adult, right? That’s what you said.”

“Exactly. They met as teacher and student, and it hasn’t even been a year. It’s nearly the same as if she still went to this school. The only difference is, neither the police nor the school have jurisdiction anymore.”

The air was heavy. This situation was far more serious than simple gossip.

“We can’t jump to conclusions,” I said. “So far, all they’ve done is spend time together. There’s nothing wrong with that.”

Danielle nodded, but she didn’t seem convinced.

CHAPTER NINE

My first college acceptance came in an envelope so big that it stuck halfway out of our mailbox. I opened it alone, pulling apart the glossy red flaps to reveal a full color pamphlet with *Welcome to the University of Southern California* printed across the top. My parents were surprisingly excited when they found out. Mom gave me a big hug. I didn't want to go to USC, so the letter was little more than an ego boost in my eyes.

That weekend, we went out to dinner to celebrate. I chose the family-owned pho place in our neighborhood, where I could stuff myself for less than \$12. I didn't want my achievement to be marred by grumbling about prices.

"I can't believe they're offering you half off tuition," Mom said.

"My SAT score is above their average."

"Don't forget," Dad began, "their tuition is over sixty thousand a year. Half is still a small fortune." He had read the acceptance packet very carefully.

"It doesn't really matter. I'm not going to go there. I want to leave the state, remember?"

"Of course, but the Ivies charge a lot too. Even if you got into one, it might be better to send you somewhere where you have a scholarship," Mom said between slurps of her coffee smoothie, which she'd ordered in lieu of food.

"You really wouldn't let me go to an Ivy even if I got in? Just because of the money?"

"Money isn't a secondary consideration," Dad said.

“You guys are both programmers. If this is an issue for us how is anyone paying for college?”

“We make too much to qualify for any financial aid, but that doesn’t mean we have an extra sixty thousand dollars a year lying around. You’d have to take out loans. You’ll thank us when you don’t graduate with tens of thousands of dollars in debt,” Dad said.

Mom nodded. “Schools don’t take into account how expensive our area is. What if we drained our savings to pay for your school, then the economy took a turn and your father and I lost our jobs? We’d lose everything. You’d have to drop out.”

“I guess it’s my fault for being born,” I said. I meant it as a joke, but neither Mom nor Dad laughed. “I’ll take the debt. It’s worth it for an Ivy degree, right? I can always pay it off.”

Dad laughed. “You won’t be saying that once you actually have debt. What job are you going to get with an English degree?”

“I don’t know yet. I haven’t figured out my whole life. English is just my best subject.” I didn’t dream about my future career; I dreamt about college.

“We can worry about paying for an Ivy league if you get in,” Mom said, patting my hand. “Just keep working hard in your classes and finish the year strong. I hope all the fun you’ve been having isn’t too distracting.”

“Fun?” I asked.

“You’ve been out of the house a lot lately.”

“Has she really?” Dad asked.

“See, I’m still home more than Dad.”

Dad grunted. “We can compare when you become the breadwinner. If the company starts doing layoffs, who do you think they’ll get rid of? The guy who leaves at 5pm or the guy who does overtime?”

“I’m not mad,” Mom said. “You’re free to hang out with your friends. I’m glad you’ve finally got people to spend time with.”

I filled my mouth with savory broth and noodles to keep from retorting. Even when Mom was trying to be nice to me, she always said the wrong thing.

* * *

One day, Ari and Mikayla told me they wanted to show me something in private. We retreated to Mikayla’s car at lunch.

“What is it?” I was annoyed because Danielle brought in a homemade pie for us to try, and I didn’t trust the freshman girls to leave any. If Astrid was there she’d make sure to save me a slice, but she hadn’t been coming around recently.

“It’s about Chelsea and Mr. Lo. Beth gave me an update,” Ari said. He held out his phone. It showed a grainy picture of a Snapchat story, the quality degraded from being screenshotted and sent around so many times. I could make out a thin woman in a slinky dress next to a man wearing a blue suit, both of their heads cut off from the photo.

“What is it?”

“You can’t tell?” Ari asked.

“You know who it is,” Mikayla said.

“Chelsea and Mr. Lo?”

“Bingo,” Ari said. “Chelsea posted this picture last week, which means they’re really together.”

Instead of shock or surprise, a heavy dread settled into my chest. This should've been totally separate from me and Danielle, but I felt like somehow we would be pulled into the turmoil.

"That's not all. Meg sent me this too." Ari swiped to the next picture. Another blurry Snapchat story, this time showing a locket engraved with a date and *P. L. & C. T.* Peter Lo and Chelsea Tran.

"The date is the day of last year's graduation," Mikayla said.

"What the hell?" was all I could manage.

"This has to be their anniversary or something. How creepy is that?" Ari said.

"It's the same thing as waiting until a girl's eighteenth birthday to start dating," Mikayla added. "There's no way their relationship popped up out of the blue the second she graduated. They were definitely flirting way before then."

I put my hands on my head in a futile attempt to calm my thoughts. How could Mr. Lo seem so innocent, then do something like this? He was even bold enough to get her jewelry commemorating the day he officially crossed the line.

"Who else knows about this?" I asked.

Ari rubbed the back of his neck. "Well, Beth said a lot of people from her year recognized Mr. Lo on Chelsea's private story. That's how the information got around to Beth, but she only told me. We might be the only people who know and still go to school here."

"Or," Mikayla said, "hundreds of people already know. There's no saying."

I rubbed my eyes. "I can't handle this."

"How do you think we feel? We have to see him in class every day," Ari said.

Mikayla nodded. "His whole 'I'll be your confidant' act makes me sick now."

“What do we do?” I asked. “Do we tell Ms. Ohara? Or the principal?”

“Fuck the principal, let’s tell the police,” Mikayla said.

“He didn’t technically do anything illegal. She was eighteen and not a student either,” Ari said.

“You really think Mr. Lo waited until Chelsea graduated to fuck her? Even then, he groomed her. People should care. We can take this to the news.” Mikayla was really fired up. Ari looked down at his hands. I knew he wasn’t willing to act. He’d always loved gossip, but he didn’t like getting involved.

“Let’s start small. Are we telling Ms. Ohara or not?” I asked.

“We should wait until we have a plan,” Mikayla said. “Make sure the administration can’t sweep this under the rug.”

Ari nodded. Mikayla looked at me expectantly, and I nodded too. Thinking of a plan was beyond me at that moment. I wished Ari and Mikayla had never told me anything about this.

On Wednesday morning, Danielle picked me up at 6:30am. Her headlights looked like lighthouse beams cutting through the morning mist.

“Good morning,” I murmured, climbing into the car.

“Tired?”

“I stayed up late last night.” I’d been texting Ari and Mikayla until 1:00am. Having to sit in Mr. Lo’s class every day was driving them insane, and they vented about him for hours. They used to love how he opened every class by chatting about his personal life, and now it disgusted them.

“Studying for AP tests?”

“Sure,” I said. Danielle gave me a searching look but didn’t press further.

We went all the way to Los Altos for breakfast, a city I once made fun of for being uber wealthy but had gotten familiar with since becoming closer with Danielle. She had an encyclopedic knowledge the bougiest breakfast places in the South Bay Area, and in the past few months we’d visited nearly all of them.

We flew down a mostly empty highway while traffic slowly built up on the other side of the road. All the software engineers and executives were streaming away from their fancy houses in the hills and towards the massive tech complexes that dominated my neighborhood.

We turned onto a quaint shopping street lined with brick buildings. It was quiet in the car. I watched the little boutiques and Italian restaurants flash by. One of them caught my eye. I straightened, staring at the restaurant as we sped past. I recognized the tree in front, the bench to the right, the lights strung above the wooden door—it was where the picture of Chelsea and Mr. Lo had been taken.

“What’s up?” Danielle glanced at me, her eyebrows pulled together.

“It’s nothing,” I said. I turned back to the front as the restaurant shrank from view.

I pulled a chunk of my pancake apart, watching it break into white crumbles. They were lemon ricotta pancakes with fresh berries on top, easily some of the best I’d ever had, but I didn’t feel like eating.

“We can get a box and store the leftovers in my classroom fridge,” Danielle said. I looked up, startled out of my thoughts.

“It’s okay, I can finish them.”

“It’s almost time to go.”

“Oh.” I’d lost track of time. “I’m sorry.”

Danielle wove her fingers together and sat her chin on top. Whenever she sat like that she looked especially like a teacher. “Juno, what’s wrong?”

“Nothing.”

“You’re being quiet, acting strange, and not eating your delicious pancakes for no reason?” She reached over and took a forkful of my food. “Something is definitely wrong.”

I was good at keeping secrets. I hadn’t told anyone about my private time with Danielle. I never told my mom how much my Homecoming dress actually cost. But I really wanted to confess about Mr. Lo; it was a secret I didn’t enjoy keeping.

“We agreed not to tell you, but... remember that rumor about Chelsea and Mr. Lo?”

Danielle’s eyes hardened. “What about it?”

I swallowed. It was hard to say it out loud, especially alone at breakfast with her. We were different from Chelsea and Mr. Lo, we stayed within the boundaries of friendship, but to someone who couldn’t see behind closed doors, our relationships would look the same.

“Beth told Ari that Chelsea posted some photos that basically confirm she and Mr. Lo have been together since graduation.”

“Shit. This is bad.”

“I shouldn’t have said anything. It’s too much—” She grabbed my hand.

“Juno, if anyone has to deal with this, it should be me. Not you.”

“I don’t know what to do. Mikayla wants to tell the police, or the news. Anyone who will care. But I’m not sure it’ll achieve anything.”

“No way. Having officers and reporters streaming through the school would be chaos. There are proper channels for this sort of thing,” Danielle said.

I was relieved. I didn't want people investigating the school either. They might find evidence of how much Danielle and I hung out, and then we'd be the ones under fire even though we hadn't done anything wrong. Something like that had the power to destroy our friendship.

"What are you going to do?"

"Don't worry about it." Danielle squeezed my hand. "I can handle this."

I felt like I should convince her I was mature enough to make a plan together, but my urge to prove myself to her wasn't flaring up. I felt like her friend, not just a precocious kid. I could let her take this off my shoulders.

* * *

Weeks passed with no news on the Chelsea and Mr. Lo situation. Danielle didn't mention it to me, and I didn't ask. For all Mikayla's big talk, she didn't act. We had homework, we had tests.

Eventually, we noticed that Astrid had all but disappeared. She still came to class, but she never showed up during lunch anymore. Her friends were still there—moaning about how all their favorite seniors were about to graduate—but Astrid never joined them.

"Astrid was always bound to be pushed out of the friend group. She's a rainbows and unicorns girl, and her friends are definitely cooler than that," I said. It was lunch and Ari, Mikayla, and I were hanging out in Danielle's room. Danielle had locked the door so the freshmen couldn't sneak up on us gossiping about them.

"They still talk every day in class. I've kept them in the same table group," Danielle said.

"Maybe Astrid has a boytoy who's taking up all her time," Ari said.

I scoffed. "She's not that kind of girl."

“I think she could definitely pull, but she would never let a man get in the way of her one true love,” Mikayla jerked her head towards me.

“Oh, come on.” Astrid’s obsession with me hadn’t waned after almost a year. Mikayla and Ari noticed it sometime in the winter and enjoyed making fun of me for it.

“On the contrary,” Danielle said. “Maybe she’s avoiding us because she feels guilty for having someone new. Wouldn’t want to make Juno jealous.” Mikayla and Ari laughed a little too loud at that.

Outside, someone tried the handle for the door, then knocked. I opened the door to find one of Danielle’s freshman boys was quivering in front of me.

“Sorry, I can come back later,” he said.

“Now’s a good time,” Danielle called from behind me.

“I don’t want to interrupt you when you’re with your friends,” the boy said.

I glanced at Danielle for a cue. Her face was sober. She got up from the couch where she’d been sitting next to Ari and returned to her desk.

“Come in,” she said. Her voice was suddenly tight. “And Juno, prop the door open.” I wish I could’ve caught her eyes in that moment, but she was hidden behind her desk.

I always waited until the halls were mostly empty after school to walk to Danielle’s room. As I made my way there, I found Astrid sitting on a bench in front the journalism classroom, her knees tucked under her chin.

“Astrid,” I called. Her feet shot to the ground. She looked ready to bolt.

“Hey, Juno.”

“What are you doing here?”

“Waiting for my sister.” She gestured to the classroom. “She’s staying late working on an article. She’s the editor-in-chief.” Astrid smiled. She was proud of her big sister. She probably didn’t know the newspaper club was always strapped for staff members and took whomever they could get.

“Where have you been? I’ve missed you,” I said.

Her eyes darted to the classroom door. “Just busy,” she said. She couldn’t lie to save her life. Not to me.

“Busy with what? Are the rumors true? You have a boyfriend now?”

“No, I don’t, that’s not—” she stuttered. Her face was getting red. “It’s nothing like that, I swear. There’s no boy.” I enjoyed teasing Astrid. She was too young to understand her crush on me, and that made it easy to get a rise out of her.

“Is it a girl?”

Her eyes went wide. “No, I’m not into girls. I think.” She squeezed her eyes shut, trying to get back on track. It was endearing how easily she got flustered. “I just can’t come around the room at lunch anymore.”

“Did something happen?” She didn’t respond. “Astrid?”

“I don’t want to say.”

I sat down next to her and placed a hand on her shoulder.

“Are you okay? You can tell me if something’s wrong.” She looked up at me. All of a sudden she was on the brink of tears.

“It’s my sister,” she said. “She made me promise not to hang out in Ms. Ohara’s room anymore.” I could picture her sister Tara staring at us from across the restaurant on Danielle’s birthday. Of course it was her fault.

“Why?” I asked. It came out more like a demand than a question.

“She said—”

The door swung open and Tara strode out. “Juno, what are you doing here?” she asked.

“Just happened by.”

“Are you ready to go, Astrid?” Tara asked. Astrid hopped off the bench. The two sisters began to walk off, and Tara glanced at me over her shoulder. “Good to see you, Juno.”

“You too.” I couldn’t remember if Tara and I had ever had a full conversation before. I watched them walk down the hall; I had a feeling I shouldn’t head to Danielle’s room right away. Sure enough, just before they disappeared around the corner, Tara turned back to stare me down.

CHAPTER TEN

I'd only been called into the principal's office twice in my life. The first time was in elementary school. I was chasing a kid around with sap on my fingers, and when I finally pressed the sticky mess on his shirt he turned around and shook me so hard all the moms on yard duty ran to save me. The principal called us both into the office, and I bawled the entire time. My second trip to the office was in freshman year, when they told me Ms. Murphy gave me the award for best English student in the grade.

This time, when I was delivered a yellow slip calling me into the office in second period, I wasn't sure if I should be scared or excited. In the past, my mind always went straight to punishment with this sort of thing, but I allowed myself to be optimistic instead. I could be getting a scholarship, or another award, or even an invitation to give the graduation speech. I TA'ed for Danielle next period, so I could go straight to her room afterwards and tell her about it.

Bored students turned their heads towards me as I walked to the office. A year ago I wouldn't have glanced into the windows of classrooms to see who was watching me—no one knew me anyway—but things were different now. Danielle turned me from a nobody to a Homecoming princess.

The secretary pointed me to an empty chair outside the principal's office. The door was closed, and I could hear the quiet rhythm of a conversation inside. I recognized Ari's jacket slung

over one of the other waiting room chairs. He must have been the one inside the office, which meant the meeting was probably about graduation speeches. He was an obvious choice.

The door opened and Ari emerged, his face red and wet. He'd been crying. I tried to make eye contact with him and get a hint of what I was about to walk into, but he kept his eyes down.

Could the meeting be about Mr. Lo? Maybe Danielle had talked to Principal Kelly after all, and they were asking me and Ari for the truth. My heart pounded faster. What was I supposed to say? I heard from a friend who heard from a friend who heard from... on and on? Were they mad that we were spreading rumors? Everything was true. Ari must have shown them the screenshots. I kept staring at him hoping he would acknowledge me, but he snatched his jacket off the chair and stalked out of the office.

“Juno?” Principal Kelly said. “I’ll see you now.”

I sat down in the chair across from Principal Kelly’s heavy wooden desk. The seat’s worn fabric was itchy on my exposed thighs. I was suddenly self-conscious of my shorts and tank top. Was she going to tell me my outfit was inappropriate? Dress code was rarely an issue at our school, but with teachers like Mr. Lo around...

“Thank you for coming in, Juno.” The door closed with a *click*. “You’ve always been an excellent member of our campus community. Do you know where you’re headed in the fall?”

“Not yet. I’m still waiting for a few decisions.”

“Ah yes. I know some of those big ones come in late.” Her leather chair squeaked when she sank into it. “You’re not in trouble. You have nothing to worry about.” I’d just seen Ari storm out crying. I was definitely worried. “I just want to ask you a few questions about one of our teachers.”

“I don’t know anything about what happened. I just heard about it from Ari,” I blurted.

“So, you weren’t with Ari the night of Homecoming?” she asked. I stared at her for a second. I didn’t know what Homecoming had to do with Mr. Lo.

“No, I was with Ari that night.”

“Did you see Ms. Ohara?”

I had to lie, like I always did when it came to seeing Danielle outside of school. Principal Kelly would never accept our friendship. It looked too similar to an inappropriate relationship, and even if I swore up and down that nothing romantic or sexual had ever happened between us, that was impossible to prove. But what if my lie clashed with what Ari said? Maybe he threw me and Danielle both under the bus. I had to find some place between the truth and what I knew would scare Principal Kelly.

“I saw her in the parking lot. After we left the dance.”

“Juno, we’ve heard some reports that Ms. Ohara was at a student party on the night of Homecoming. Teachers should not be going to the homes of students for fun. And—you’re not in trouble for this, we have no reason to believe it’s true—but if there *was* underage drinking happening at that party and Ms. Ohara was there, that is very serious.”

“She wasn’t there.” For the drinking part, at least.

“And you’ve only spent time with Ms. Ohara at school and school events?” There was no half-truth I could tell.

“Yes,” I said. I’d never lied to a principal before, but it was my relationship with Danielle that was getting her in trouble, so it was up to me to protect her.

Principal Kelly seemed relieved. Maybe she was just grateful she wouldn’t have to do extra paperwork. “We know that you and Ms. Ohara have a close relationship. That’s good,

within reason. We think pedagogy can really benefit from tight bonds between teacher and student.”

I nodded. I didn’t like how she kept saying ‘we’ when it was just me and her in the room. It made me imagine faculty meetings where they discussed blurry pictures of me in the front seat of Danielle’s car, and all the teachers raised their hands to say, *yes, I think that’s all right*, or *oh no, someone save that poor girl*.

“As I said before, we value you as part of our community, which is why I feel I should warn you about something. Do you read the school newspaper?”

“Yes,” I said, though I only skimmed the headlines.

“Good. It’s a fine publication. In their next issue, there’s a particular article that has caused us to look into some things, like this rumor about Ms. Ohara at a student party. The article doesn’t mention anyone by name, but it may lead to greater scrutiny of some of the more... observable bonds between teachers and students. I wanted to have this chat with you to get ahead of any of those conversations.”

“They’re writing an article about teacher-student friendships?”

“Yes.”

“You’re going to let them print it? Even though it’s saying stuff that isn’t true about Ms. Ohara?” I surprised myself with my boldness, but my mission was clear now. Protect Danielle.

“The newspaper advisor has worked very closely with the author to make sure the article doesn’t have any false claims. It’s just an opinion piece. We value open discourse at this school.”

“Then why did you ask me about the Homecoming party?” I was the one lying about Danielle, but I was still getting angry. “The author is lying if they said Ms. Ohara was at Ari’s house.”

“They don’t make that claim. We decided to interview some students after hearing about the article, just to make sure there wasn’t anything inappropriate going on.”

“Who said that Ms. Ohara was at Ari’s house? Because it’s not true.”

“We can’t disclose that. Frankly Juno, I’ve already told you more than I probably should have because I assumed you were a mature young woman who could handle something like this with tact. But I’m not sure that was the right assessment.”

“Sorry,” I muttered. The sting of her disappointment wasn’t as strong as it should’ve been. I was defending Danielle, after all.

“You can read the article when it comes out. If you have no more questions you can return to class.”

They were going after Danielle, for what? Giving us a ride to Ari’s house? That was ridiculous. Even if they knew about the meals we shared or the late nights in her apartment I would still be angry. There were worse secrets floating around the school. Mr. Lo and Chelsea were a real teacher-student relationship. That was a million times worse than my friendship with Danielle.

“What about Mr. Lo?” I asked.

“What about him?”

“You know what I’m talking about.”

“Juno, you’ll have to be more specific.”

“He’s dating a student.”

Principal Kelly narrowed her eyes. “We’ve been informed that there may be some kind of connection between him and a *former* student, and we’re taking all the necessary steps to handle it.”

“You’re not firing him? Do you even care?”

“What happens between adults outside of our campus is beyond our control. This matter is strictly private, and I must remind you that spreading inflammatory rumors is against school policy. I’d appreciate it if you didn’t discuss the issue.”

She was covering it up. The school didn’t care that Mr. Lo was sleeping with a girl who just graduated. None of this was about protecting students. It was about covering their asses if their dirty laundry ever got out.

“I think I’ll go now,” I said. If I stayed any longer I’d end up shouting at Principal Kelly.

She nodded. “Just do me a favor. Keep this conversation between us.”

There were only a few minutes left in third period when I got out. If I returned to class it would mean seeing Danielle and having to explain everything. Once she heard about this she might want to stop spending time together. I decided to keep walking the halls until the bell rang instead.

At lunch, I hid around the corner from Danielle’s room. I watched Ari walk up to the door with Mikayla behind him. He tried to open the door, but it was locked. He tried again, and again, and didn’t stop until Mikayla pulled his hand back. She led him away towards the parking lot. I was glad they didn’t look for me. I didn’t want to talk about what happened.

For the first time in months, I got school lunch. There were ten dollars left in my account that my mom had been begging me to spend before graduation. She would be happy. I took my oily slice of pizza behind the science building, where the only other people I could see were a couple of band kids nuzzling into each other’s necks. In sophomore year, Ari’s appendix burst

and he was out from school for three whole days, and the entire time I ate back here where no one could see me crouching alone.

I finished my slice of pizza in three minutes, then sat and stared at my phone while the band kids quietly moaned into each other's mouths. Ari and Mikayla were probably in the McDonald's drive through, sharing an order of twenty chicken nuggets because Ari would be too beside himself to decide what he wanted. Danielle's location was a mystery. If I had to guess, I'd say she heard the news and locked herself inside her classroom to hide from us.

I heard footsteps approaching and looked up to see Astrid rounding the corner. When she spotted me she turned and walked in the opposite direction, and I scrambled up to catch her.

"Astrid, wait!" I caught up to her in a narrow corridor between buildings that felt like it was miles away from the rest of the school. "Where are you going?"

"I just wanted to be alone."

"I guess we have the same secret spot." I noticed her crumpling and uncrumpling a small piece of yellow paper. "What's that?" She didn't respond. I grabbed her hands and she opened them for me, obedient as always. It was an office slip. "Principal Kelly talked to you?"

"Yes," she said.

"About what?"

"Nothing."

"Was it about Ms. Ohara? What did you tell them?" Every question came out like a demand. I couldn't help it. I could smell guilt on Astrid. Suddenly, I remembered the Homecoming party. Astrid was one of the first people to arrive, and she could've seen Danielle driving away from the house. "Did you tell the principal that Ms. Ohara was at Ari's Homecoming party?"

Astrid shrank even smaller. “I told her I wasn’t sure who I saw.”

“So you did tell her about it. But how did she confirm it was Ms. Ohara? Who else knew about it?” Astrid glanced around, looking for an escape. She didn’t want to tell me. “You told your sister, didn’t you? That’s why she doesn’t let you come to Ms. Ohara’s room anymore. Is she the one writing this article?”

“I didn’t want to hurt any of you. If I could take it all back, I would,” Astrid said, her face contorted with guilt. “I didn’t know Tara would get so mad. I thought it was normal. You and Ms. Ohara are friends.”

Astrid was too naïve to blame anyone but herself, when in reality I was the who ruined things for her by being too close to Danielle. Did it really matter that Danielle and I were only friends if our relationship could still turn people away? If I wasn’t around, Astrid could’ve kept her friends, favorite teacher, and innocence forever.

“Never mind, Astrid.” I shoved the crumpled office slip back into her hands. “Take your alone time. I’ve just been going through a lot.”

Astrid smiled up at me. “I understand. I’ve been struggling with all of this too.” She was so quick to forgive me. She was liquid wax, happy to be pressed into whatever shape I desired.

Just as Astrid was about to disappear behind the building, she turned back. “I’m worried I messed things up. I made Tara mad, I made you mad, and I’m sure Ms. Ohara’s angry too. I didn’t know I wasn’t supposed to say anything about this stuff.”

“It’s not your fault. We shouldn’t have—” I stopped myself. If I wasn’t careful, I could confess something. “I shouldn’t have involved you in something you had to keep secret.”

After school, my feet led me halfway to Danielle's room before I realized where I was going and redirected to the parking lot. Once I got home, I dropped my things on the couch, inhaled a cup of low-fat yogurt—the only snack in the house—and went straight to bed.

I woke up three hours later, cranky and more tired than before. I stumbled out of my room, heading for the bathroom as stealthily as I could.

“Juno,” my mom called. “Come here.”

She was sitting on the couch in front of my half-open backpack. Mom had the office slip in her hands.

“What's this?” She asked.

“Did you look through my bag?”

“The zipper is broken. I was going to fix it and this fell out.” I had no reason to doubt her—Mom had never gone through my things before—but I couldn't shake the feeling that she'd violated my privacy. I'd learned that people were watching me much closer than I'd once thought.

“What is this?” she asked again.

“An office slip.”

“Why did you have to go to the office?”

“The principal wanted to talk to me.” I didn't have the energy to lie. I hoped by some miracle she would tire herself out and stop questioning me.

“Is this about your new friend? With the jeep?”

“What?”

“The one who's always taking you out. He parks on the side of the house. I don't know what you two get up to.”

“You said I was free to go out.” I hadn’t broken any of my parents’ rules. I don’t think they’d ever accounted for something like my relationship with Danielle though.

“No, I didn’t stop you. Maybe I made a mistake.” She waved the office slip. “I mean, the principal’s office, Juno?”

“You don’t even know why I was called in. It could’ve been good.”

“What was it then? Tell me, Juno.”

“They wanted to talk about an article in the school newspaper. Just asked me some questions for it.”

“Really?”

“I swear to god.”

Mom sighed. She placed the office slip on the coffee table, face down. She couldn’t bear to look at it. She only cared about what I did in my free time because I’d been called into the office. If I was in a real relationship with a teacher, would she even notice?

“Okay,” she said. “I believe you. You’ve just been spending so much time outside the house that I saw the slip and my imagination ran wild. I can’t keep an eye on you all the time, not like when you were little and I didn’t have to work. You’re going to college soon. I don’t want you going down a bad path at the last minute.”

“I’m not going down a bad path. I’m just growing up.” I felt like I’d aged ten years since last spring.

“You are,” she said. “I don’t know what happened to my little girl.”

I smiled to fight off the prickling at the corners of my eyes. “Just high school.”

I didn’t even know I was lying until the words came out feeling wrong. I hadn’t been a high schooler for months. I’d been someone else, someone older. Danielle’s best friend.

Mom stood up with her arms outstretched. “Hug?”

I went into her arms. She squeezed me tight and rocked me back and forth. I’d forgotten what it felt like to be comforted by my mom instead of Danielle. There was no rush of validation at being worthy, and instead of feeling like an adult, I felt younger than ever. Mom would never figure out the real me—I didn’t want her to, honestly—but she tried to take care of me in her own way.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

I stood in front of Danielle's classroom and counted the scratches on the door. I hadn't talked to her since I was called into Principal Kelly's office, and for the first time in months I felt dread instead of excitement at the thought of seeing her.

The door opened and Danielle stared at me. Her clothes and hair looked as nice as ever, but there were little things—a mascara smudge, a wrinkle on her collar—that told me she was off.

"You don't have to come in," she said. "If you leave, I'll still mark you here. You don't have to come back for the rest of the year if you don't want to."

I couldn't stand this version of Danielle with her tail tucked between her legs. I needed the woman I knew in private. I pushed past her inside.

"Principal Kelly talked to me at lunch," she said. She sat at her desk and I went to the couch. I could close my eyes and pretend we were at her apartment. I might never get to go back there again. "You guys knew what was happening before I did. I tried telling Principal Kelly about Mr. Lo—"

"But she didn't care," I said. Danielle nodded.

"She claims they're doing an internal investigation. They're keeping a close eye on me too, just to verify the administration's belief that nothing is going on—that's how she worded it."

“They’re not going to find anything. No one knows about—” I stopped myself. It was better not to talk about all the time we spent alone together. “You didn’t do anything wrong. I wanted us to become closer. If there’s any blame, we share it. Principal Kelly should be more worried about the teacher who’s actually dating a student.”

“A recent graduate.” Danielle said. She sounded like the principal. “If she wasn’t a student, it’s not the school’s problem. Principal Kelly doesn’t want to tarnish her record if she doesn’t have to. Mr. Lo played it smart.” And we hadn’t. But we weren’t playing anything; our friendship grew faster than either of us was prepared for. “I don’t know if she really cares about any of this. The real problem is that people are going to start asking questions about what’s happening behind closed doors.”

“They shouldn’t worry about me. I trust you completely. You would never do something like Mr. Lo.”

Danielle gave me a pained look. “Have you ever been worried that I would?”

I hadn’t worried, but I had thought about it. I’d wondered if she ever had the desire to place a hand on my leg while I was beside her in the car. Or, sitting across from her at a restaurant, I wondered if other people thought we were on a date. It was impossible to stop the thoughts from passing through my mind, but I never worried that Danielle would actually do any of those things. In the past year, she’d had a million chances to make a pass at me, and instead she firmly established that she would never see me that way.

“No,” I said.

“You had to think about it. I never should’ve gotten close enough for you to even consider the possibility. Other students have definitely noticed our friendship. If any of them know I’m a lesbian, they’re probably all but certain that I’m preying on you.”

“That’s messed up. You would never do something like that.”

“Haven’t I already? I invited you to my apartment.”

“That’s not the same. We’re friends. That’s it.”

“We’re not supposed to be friends. You’re my student.”

“TA,” I said.

Danielle let out a harsh laugh. “Big difference.”

I was afraid that Danielle would drop me entirely. I got up and crouched in front of where she was sitting so we were eye to eye.

“You haven’t done anything wrong. I know our relationship isn’t normal, but it’s good for me. Look how much I’ve grown this year. Please don’t feel like you’re a monster for spending time with me. If anything, you’re my savior.”

“Do you really mean that? I haven’t messed everything up for you?”

“Definitely not.”

“Honestly, Juno, you’ve helped me a lot too.”

I smiled. “Everything will be fine. I’m graduating soon. All of us are. This whole mess isn’t going to matter after that.”

“But I’m staying here once you’re gone. Principal Kelly gave me a clear warning to change my behavior, or I could be fired.”

“Okay. I can stop coming to your room after school. And for other things... we can be more careful.”

“Is this really okay? You don’t think I’m a monster?”

“Of course not. I wouldn’t be friends with a monster.”

Danielle smiled, but it didn’t reach her eyes. Better than nothing.

“Please, just promise me one thing,” I said. “Don’t abandon me.”

“What kind of teacher would I be if I did that?” Danielle and I both laughed.

We tried to pretend like nothing had happened for the rest of the period. We graded papers and chatted about life, like always, but the air felt different. I couldn’t stop wondering what an outside observer would see when they looked at us.

* * *

When the newspapers were dropped off in first period, I didn’t grab one. I watched the rest of the class pass by the papers without so much as a glance. Maybe no one would even read the article.

“Ready to go?” Mikayla asked. As we walked out, she grabbed the top newspaper off the pile, trying to be subtle as she slipped it in her bag.

In third period, Danielle sent me off campus to get coffee. I noticed a copy of the paper on her desk before I left. When I got back to school, balancing two full cups in a tray, I caught a glimpse of students passing the paper to each other in a classroom. By lunch, Ari and the three freshman girls—no Astrid, of course—were brandishing newspapers in outrage.

The article was titled “Opinion: Teachers and Students Should Not Be Friends,” and it argued that friendships between teachers and students made the learning environment uncomfortable and unsafe for everyone. As promised, no names appeared in the article, but there were enough clues to make it clear who they were talking about. There was a reference to a teacher influencing the results of Homecoming court, and another to classrooms being full of “favored” students at lunch. Other teachers were called out too, but not Mr. Lo. Principal Kelly probably had all references to him scrubbed. How many other transgressions had she pushed under the rug?

The freshman girls were angry and confused. They didn't understand why their favorite teacher was being accused of inappropriate behavior with students. They didn't know what I knew. I'd ruined Danielle for so many other people.

By the third day after the article was released, I was tired of talking about it. Ari, on the other hand, was more upset than ever. Mikayla took us out to lunch to get a break from the tension in Danielle's room, but Ari brought up the article again as soon as we were parked back at school.

"That bitch," he spat. The author was anonymous, but we all knew it was Tara. "She doesn't know what she's talking about. We're more mature than her fourteen-year-old sister. We can handle ourselves with a teacher. It's not like Ohara has ever done anything inappropriate."

"That depends on your definition of the word. Going to dinner with your students counts as inappropriate to a lot of people," Mikayla said. She'd never been as close to Danielle as us, and she was clearly getting sick of the whole situation.

Ari turned to me in the backseat. "Juno, you agree with me, right? It's literally just a meal. It's in a public place. Who cares? And she was at my house *once* for like ten minutes because *I* invited her in."

Ari still didn't know how often I'd been alone with Danielle. "You have to admit, it's not really normal," I said.

"Of course it's not normal, we're not normal students. Maybe if she was going out to eat with every kid in the class it would be weird. Like how Mr. Lo tells everyone to come talk to him one-on-one if they've got life struggles. That's creepy. It's different for us and Ohara though. We're friends."

"You don't think there's anything wrong with that?" Mikayla asked.

“Of course not. What are you saying? We’ve literally been friends all year.”

Mikayla held her hands up innocently. “This is more your thing. I just hang around for the free food.”

Ari turned to me again. He was desperate for someone to agree with him. “Juno, there’s nothing wrong with it, right?”

I didn’t speak for a moment. I used to think that as long as Danielle and I never crossed into romantic or sexual territory, we weren’t doing anything wrong, but clearly our friendship had negative impacts. No one could tell what lines we had or hadn’t crossed. They only saw our intimacy.

“It’s not exactly right.”

“What the fuck are you saying?” Ari demanded. Mikayla gave me a small smile through the rearview mirror. “You’re literally friends with Ohara too. You’re saying that’s wrong? Why don’t you go write your own article then. I’m sure Tara needs a friend.”

“Shut up, Ari,” I said. “It’s just a moral gray area. Saying it’s completely fine is a fantasy.”

“I agree,” Mikayla said.

Ari looked between us, but his anger met walls on either side. “I thought you guys were mature enough to be friends with Ohara. I guess not.” He pulled himself out of the car and slammed the door behind him. We sat there for a moment as Ari stomped back into the school.

“I’m surprised you didn’t agree with him,” Mikayla said. “You’re closer with Ohara than either of us. You should be freaking out right now.”

“That wouldn’t do any good. The article’s out. People will forget about it soon enough, or we’ll graduate. Then none of this will matter.”

“Are you going to come back to visit Ohara?”

“Of course.” I had been counting on it. I couldn’t let her go yet.

“But you just said that you think your relationship is inappropriate. Or at least, you don’t think it’s all sunshine and special treatment like Ari does. Why would you keep seeing her?”

“We’re friends.” Just because it wasn’t right didn’t mean I loved Danielle any less.

“Juno, have you ever considered that Ohara was, I don’t know, manipulating you or something?”

“No. She never pushed me to do anything I didn’t want to do.” I could take ownership of the fact that our friendship was inappropriate, but I never wanted someone to think Danielle was a predator because of it.

“Okay, but she’s a teacher and you’re a student, and everyone knows you’re not supposed to hang out all the time. So why did she want to be your friend?”

“She likes me. We get along.”

“Look, Juno, you’re cool but you’re not that special. I’m sure she’s gotten along with plenty of students, but she’s not taking them all out to breakfast and shit.”

“You knew about that?”

“I saw her driving you to school super early once, and you have bacon on your breath sometimes in first period. I don’t think all of this is as secret as you think it is.”

The bubble Danielle and I lived in was bursting, or maybe it had burst a long time ago.

“Ohara has always played favorites with her students, but not so much that people wrote op-eds about it.” Mikayla said. “What changed?”

I didn’t want to say it, but I knew exactly what had changed. Last year, Danielle had a fiancé and a wedding coming up. By the time I became her TA, she was completely alone. I

could imagine her returning to school, more desperate than ever for someone to prove she wasn't unlovable, and finding me—lonely and enamored with her.

The first bell rang, signaling five minutes until we had to be in class. Mikayla gathered up her purse.

“If you ever want to skip TA'ing I'll take you out to coffee. I've got a free third period. The vibes in that room are rancid these days.” She got out and walked towards the school.

I didn't feel manipulated, but Danielle did have power over me. She could see everything I was, understand it, and hold it in her hands. Meanwhile she stretched beyond the horizon in my eyes. How long would we have to be friends for me to see every side of her? Was it even possible? For every year I aged, she grew too. I would never catch up. I only got to be her friend because I happened to find her when she was desperate enough to settle for a child.

I decided to be late to class for once. I'd been a good kid my entire life, I deserved some innocent rebellion. By the time I was walking through the halls everyone was in class, probably worried about their test scores and mountains of homework—I envied their simplicity.

Muffled sobs echoed down the hallway. I followed them to the back of the school, behind the science building where I used to eat alone any time Ari was out sick. Peeking around the corner, I spotted Astrid, her head tucked into her knees to keep her crying quiet. I'd already done enough damage to her. I turned and left without saying a word.

* * *

Danielle and I stopped getting breakfast together, stopped meeting after school, and stopped spending late nights at her apartment. At first, I clung to my time in her classroom, but Ari kept ranting about the article long after the rest of the school had moved on and it annoyed

me endlessly. We could've slipped back into the same comfortable routine without anyone noticing, but something about it didn't feel comfortable anymore.

March was a month of rejection. I got accepted to a slew of California schools early on, and everything went downhill from there. I was rejected from my safeties in Pennsylvania, New York, and Massachusetts. I couldn't even talk to Danielle about it. She was busy with Ari, who was crying every other day about not getting into his favorite programs. Sometimes he skipped his third period class to sit and talk to her while I graded papers in the corner. She hugged him openly all the time and barely made eye contact with me.

Mom knocked on my bedroom door one day with a couple of letters in her hand.

"They're from colleges," she said. "I thought we could open them together. Wouldn't that be exciting?"

The letters were both thin. Not a good sign. "I don't know," I said.

"Come on, I want to experience some of the fun." She plopped down on my bed and handed me a letter from Pomona College.

I didn't care if I got in or not. Pomona was in California. I pulled the letter out just far enough to read *Congratulations* when my mom screamed.

"You're in! You did it honey!" She grabbed me and swayed both of our bodies in happiness. "Aren't you so excited?"

"Yeah," I said half-heartedly.

"What's wrong?"

"Nothing." No matter how many times I explained it, she didn't understand why I wanted to leave California. "Let's just open the next one."

The second envelope was from the University of Chicago. My hands shook slightly as I ripped the letter open. There was no glossy cardstock, no colorful welcome letter, just a white piece of paper with solemn black ink, *we regret to inform you...*

“Oh honey.” Mom rubbed circles on my back.

For a moment I felt my eyes tingle, but I pushed it away. “I was expecting it. No point in being upset.”

“You can let it out if you need to.”

“I don’t,” I snapped. “Ari sobs every time he gets rejected from a school, even if it’s happened a million times already. It’s pathetic.”

Her hand stopped circling on my back. “Is that how you talk about your friends?”

“I just think he should grow up a little.”

“He’s only eighteen.”

“He’s an adult. What did he think was going to happen? He gets in everywhere?” I flipped the rejection letter. “This is more likely than any acceptance.”

“I’d hardly say he’s an adult,” Mom muttered. She searched around for the letter from Pomona that I’d tossed on the bed. “You got accepted today, too. And to all those UCs. Those are great schools, and affordable.”

“Yeah. Cheap.”

“What’s wrong with that?”

“The cheap schools aren’t the ones I want to go to.”

“The Ivies are great, but you can get an education that’s just as good in California for half the price.”

“It’s not just as good. Not every school can be Princeton.”

Mom sighed. “Be open to new possibilities. Princeton was only a small part of my life.”

“But it was one of the best parts.”

“It was good, but not the best. Meeting your father, having you—those experiences were better than college.”

How great was my mom’s life now? From what I could tell, there was no fire left in my parents’ marriage. They were comfortable companions at most. She worked so much at a job she was overqualified for because raising me killed her career’s momentum. How could any of that live up to Princeton?

“Mom, are you really that happy with your life now?” I asked.

“Of course.”

“How can you be so sure?”

“I have a family, and the financial security I never had growing up. What else could I ask for?”

“Fame, wealth, power? That’s what everyone is supposed to want.”

“In Hong Kong, before we were able to come to America, me and my family all lived in one room with no kitchen, and just one shared sink for the entire floor. My life now is a dream. What is it that you want, Juno?”

I never had to fight for my basic needs. I never had to fight for a future. The only thing I wanted was to feel like I was enough.

“I want to go to Princeton.”

“Someday you’ll realize that what college you go to has almost no impact on your future happiness.”

“I’m not getting in, am I?”

She didn't even respond. She just rubbed my back again. I wanted her to tell me it would all be okay, that I was good enough to get in, but my mom wasn't a liar. I squeezed my eyes shut and the tears started flowing. She cooed while she held me in her arms.

* * *

All the Ivy Leagues released their decisions on the same day. The tension was palatable in school. When I walked into class other students shot harsh glances at me, trying to read if I'd heard back before everyone else somehow. In third period with Danielle I was quiet, refreshing my email every five minutes.

"They never post the decisions during school hours," Danielle said from her desk.

"I know," I said, refreshing again. "But what else am I supposed to do?"

"Grade quizzes." I couldn't tell if she was joking or not. Ever since the article was released, I'd had trouble reading her. The connection between us was decaying.

"I can grade quizzes if you need me to."

"No way," she laughed. "You're so stressed you'd mess it all up." She never said mean things like that to Ari. I used to think it was because he was more sensitive than me and couldn't handle her sense of humor, but now I wondered if she'd hated me all along.

I refreshed again. Nothing. "What do I do if I don't get in?"

"You've already gotten into the best UCs. Those are great schools." I didn't want her to be practical. I'd heard enough of it from my mom.

"I'll have to stay in California. And go to public school."

"I went to UC Santa Barbara. Are you saying my alma mater isn't good enough for you?"

"Yes." I wanted to make her mad. I wanted to throw a tantrum like Ari did all the time, crying openly in her room.

“That’s rude.”

“You don’t think I’m good enough to go to an Ivy, I don’t think UC Santa Barbara is good enough for me. What’s the issue?”

“I never said that.”

“You didn’t say you thought I would get in. Actually, you refuse to say it.”

“I don’t want you to think your life will be ruined if you don’t get in today.”

“See, you think I’m going to be rejected. If I was Ari you’d be rubbing my back and telling me I’m the most special girl in the world.”

“You don’t need that.”

“What if I did need it? Would you get up from your damn desk and give me a hug?”

“Juno, I don’t think it’s a good idea for me to give you a hug right now.” She glanced at the window. That pissed me off.

“But you hug Ari all the time. Why am I getting punished for the article and he isn’t? Do you really hate me that much?”

“Fuck,” Danielle muttered. Finally, like I’d been begging her to, she got up and sat in front of me. “They’re not worried about me and Ari,” she whispered. “Principal Kelly knows I’m a lesbian. It’s not fair, but I have to be more careful with you.” She hovered her hand over mine, thought better of it, and placed it on top of the desk.

“Why weren’t you careful with me from the beginning?”

“I wasn’t in the right headspace.”

“Because of the divorce?” She still visibly recoiled when I said divorce. I’d been able to put her ex-wife out of my mind when we were closer, but now that I felt more distant from her I had clarity. I had been a band-aid for her pain.

“Because of a lot of things. None of it is your fault, though.”

“What if I want it to be my fault?”

She pulled her head back and stared at me. “What do you mean, Juno?”

Getting her to pay attention to me felt good. “Isn’t it obvious?”

She grabbed my arm. It wasn’t the comforting touch I’d wanted, but it was something.

“Tell me what you mean.”

“I’d rather you did all of this because you liked me than because you’re rebounding off a terrible divorce.”

“What do you mean by liked you? If you ever thought that I felt—”

“Not like that. Obviously. I meant as in you thought I was special. You wanted to talk to me. You see me as a friend.”

She relaxed her grip on my arm. “I thought all those things about you, Juno.”

Thought. Past tense. “If you really cared about me then how could you dump me as soon as things got hard? You were using me.”

“You don’t really think that, do you?”

“I don’t know what else to think. You care about Ari more than ever, and I’m nothing to you.”

“I don’t want your senior year to be shadowed by this mess with the article. It’s better if I’m out of your life so you can be a normal high schooler. No one thinks anything of my relationship with Ari. It’s not the same with you. The closer we are, the more I’m going to fuck things up.”

“You think I’m still a normal high schooler?” She didn’t have to respond. The truth was clear. I saw the pain on her face, and a small part of me was satisfied. If she was sad for me, then she still cared about me.

CHAPTER TWELVE

I locked myself in my room to cry as soon as I got my rejections. A flood of thoughts dragged me further and further into despair—*I'm not good enough; I've already peaked; I'm going to be trapped in California for the rest of my life.*

After several hours, when my eyes were sore and my blanket was damp, there was a knock at my door and a note slid underneath. In my mom's slanted cursive, scrawled on the back of an old grocery list, the note read: *Juno, your father and I are proud of you no matter what. You have a wonderful future ahead of you. Your friend Mikayla dropped off a gift.*

There was a large container of McDonald's fries on the floor outside. They helped keep the ache in my heart at bay for a good five minutes.

In April, I went to Los Angeles with my mom to tour schools. We took the scenic route along the ocean. The sky was glass blue and the beaches were dotted with people enjoying the early heat of Southern California. I hated it. The weather reminded me of all the sunny days I'd lived already, and how college would slip seamlessly into the monotonous loneliness I'd always known.

The strongest emotion I could summon all weekend was annoyance. I was annoyed at the pain in my feet, the sun in my eyes, and the peppy way the tour guides explained "there are hundreds of clubs on campus for everyone to find their place!" Countless students at every

school were completely alone, hidden somewhere the tours didn't go. I was no doubt going to join their ranks.

Our final meal before heading back up on Sunday was Jack in the Box. My mom's favorite restaurant.

"The campuses are nice here," she said. "Just like the east coast with those big brick buildings. I even saw some ivy climbing up the walls."

I didn't say anything, just picked up a curly fry, unwound its coil, and placed it back on the tray.

"Which schools did you like? Of course, UCLA is the cheapest option, but you got that scholarship at USC. They said their honors program provides an elite education. That's pretty good, huh?"

"Every school says that."

"I suppose. It'll be up to your preference then." She took another bite of her chicken sandwich. I wished she would just tell me which school to go. Then I would have someone else to blame when I ended up friendless and miserable.

"Do you know where you want to go?" Mom asked through a mouthful of sandwich. "You'll have to choose by the end of the month. You must be leaning towards one."

"I'll probably just go to the best one that's also cheap."

"That's no good," she said. I looked up from the fries I'd been un-curling.

"Aren't you the one who's always concerned about money?"

"I don't think it's good to spend for no reason, but none of your options are going to cost too much. You should choose schools based on where you think you'll fit in."

“I don’t think I’ll fit in anywhere.” The only person I’d gotten along with in years was Danielle. I couldn’t connect with people my age.

“Don’t say that.”

“Why not?”

“It’s not true.”

“I don’t exactly have many friends right now. I’m just going from one school in California to another. Nothing’s going to change.”

Mom knit her eyebrows together. “You’re friends with Ari.”

“We don’t really hang out anymore.” He still spent every second of the day in Danielle’s room.

“What about your sweet friend who brought you the fries?” Mikayla was my only lifeline at school, but I had hated her when we first met. Would I still be her friend if I didn’t need her to help me avoid Danielle? Probably not.

“We’re not that close.”

Mom shook her head again. “You said you got that Homecoming thing this year. I thought you had lots of friends now.”

“Not really. You were right. People don’t like me for that long.”

Mom leaned forward and grabbed my hands. Across the dining room, a little girl with ketchup smeared around her mouth stared at us.

“I didn’t mean it like that, honey. You just didn’t seem like the Homecoming Queen type to me. I shouldn’t have said anything.” Mom bit her lip, trying to think of more people I could call my friend. She’d already exhausted the list.

“Oh wait! What about that person with the jeep. Look, your face got red. You don’t want to tell me who it is, so you must be *really* close.”

If she knew the truth about Danielle she’d probably be devastated. She would just see an adult taking advantage of her daughter instead of the real tragedy—the best friend I’d ever had was a teacher.

“The jeep person and I are done.”

“You broke up? I’m sorry, honey.”

“No,” I snapped. “We were never together. You’re lucky we weren’t because if I had actually been through a breakup, you’d probably make me cry by talking about it in the middle of Jack in the Box.” I squeezed my eyes closed and took a deep, shuttering breath to fend off tears.

Mom rubbed my hands while I composed myself. When she spoke again it was hesitant. “So, this person. Not a boyfriend. He was special to you in his own way, I’m sure.”

“She,” I muttered. Mom blinked at me.

“This friend. Is she the reason you feel this way? Like no one likes you?”

“No,” I said, but my voice wavered. Danielle did make me think I would be alone forever, only because her friendship was a million times more intense than any I’d had before.

“Juno... Did something happen? Is that why you’re so pessimistic about college now? You’ve been telling me how excited you are for university since you were in middle school. Something’s changed.”

I had a chance to come clean. I could tell her about Danielle and make her feel like she’d failed to protect me as much as I failed to live up to what I wanted for my future, but that

wouldn't make me feel better. If anything, secrets were the only thing I had left of my time with Danielle.

“Nothing happened. These aren't the schools I pictured myself going to, that's all. Give me some time. Maybe I can be positive again in a few months.”

Mom finally picked up her sandwich, and the little ketchup mouth girl lost interest in us.

“Good,” she said. “That's my girl. Always resilient.” I wasn't a kid anymore. It was my responsibility now to preserve my mom's image of who I was, no matter how far it was from the truth.

* * *

The year unwound itself quickly. We finished our AP tests, then even my strict English teacher Mrs. Lewis gave up on teaching and put on a scratched-up DVD of *The Grapes of Wrath* instead. When I was supposed to be in Danielle's room TA'ing I got coffee with Mikayla. Danielle never once marked me absent, nor did she ask me to come back.

At graduation I sat next to Mikayla in the back. Sure enough, Ari was giving the big speech. We'd stayed cordial with him, but he had chosen Danielle. That was seven years of friendship down the drain. He was always bragging about going to LA for college, even though his school was actually in Fullerton. I was headed to UCLA, close enough to see him if I wanted to, but I knew it wouldn't happen. I wanted a fresh start.

“I bet you all hate me right now,” he began. “You've been dreading this boring speech. You're hot, you're tired, you want to go home. Well, I assure you, you won't be bored for the next five minutes.” Ari's speech was, in fact, quite boring. While he spoke about unity and love Mikayla imitated his grandiose gestures until one of the teachers came by to shush our laughter.

“When I’m in Los Angeles next year,” he continued. We rolled our eyes at each other. “I’ll remember this moment. Our last time together as a class before we take on this wild, incredible adventure we call... life. Thank you.”

Ari went up to Danielle and gave her a big hug. I’d fantasized about that moment. At one point I thought I might follow in Beth’s footsteps, working on my speech with Danielle every second of the day and finally being rewarded with that triumphant embrace. But here I was sitting at the back, returned to the irrelevant blip I was before I met Danielle.

At the end of the ceremony, the entire class stood and we flung our caps in the air. I watched mine spiral up into the sky, then closed my hand around the first cap that brushed my fingers on the way down. I had officially graduated. One more boundary between me and Danielle gone, but it didn’t matter anymore. There was nothing left to salvage. I started to cry.

“We did it!” Mikayla shouted. Tears were flowing down her face too. I could pretend I was crying happy tears like her, instead of the truth: I was mourning the friendship I could’ve had with Danielle that started at this moment, instead of ending here.

Mikayla dragged me through the crowd to see her family. Her mom, who I’d met all the way back at Homecoming, acted like I was her own daughter.

“Juno! Congrats!” She shouted, crushing me in her arms.

“What school are you headed to in the fall?” Mikayla’s father—a tall, red-faced man—asked.

“UCLA.”

“No way, that’s a great school!”

“I always knew you were a smart one,” Mikayla’s mom chimed in.

Mikayla flicked my forehead. “Trust me, she’s stupider than she looks. We’re working on it, though.”

Mikayla’s family took a million pictures of us together. While her mom messed with the camera settings, Mikayla turned to me.

“You’re not going to ghost me over the summer, are you? Ari is still working at the theater with me. I need someone to text when he inevitably does something ridiculous.”

“Of course,” I said.

“What about after that? You, me, Thanksgiving break party?”

I’d never pictured us being friends forever. Why not though? Mikayla had been there for me since we met. I was always worried about being alone without Danielle, and here I was ignoring the friendship in front of me.

“Yeah. I’d like that,” I said.

I came across Ari while I searched for my parents. There was a huge crowd of extended family with him, and he was practically buried in leis of fresh flowers, money, and candy bars.

“Juno! Over here! Ari needs a picture with you,” Ari’s mom called. She pushed us together.

“Look at you two all grown up. I feel like you were eleven years old just yesterday,” she said.

Ari stared straight at the camera with a plastered-on smile. Neither of us put our arms around each other. He turned to me once the photo was finished, and I was worried he would ask me to hang out in LA next year.

“Goodbye, Juno,” he said. I detected no sadness in his voice, nor any anger. Our separation was merely a fact.

“Goodbye.”

I found my parents at the edge of the crowd, sitting on the empty bleachers instead of pushing through to find me. They were so predictable. I couldn't help but smile.

“We have to confess something,” Mom said. “We got you a balloon, one of the expensive ones, but it flew away during the ceremony.”

Dad was clearly less phased by the loss than Mom. “Did you see it float up? It was sometime during Ari's speech.”

“I'm so sorry. It was all my fault,” Mom continued. “I was listening to the speech and I just started nodding off. The next thing I knew, the balloon was a hundred feet above the bleachers. I don't know why your dad didn't catch it.”

“I was dozing off too,” Dad said.

“You aren't mad, are you honey?”

I looked between Mom's concerned face and Dad's nonchalant grin. I laughed. “This is so fitting, actually. Ari's speech was that bad?”

“It was great. I was up late working last night, so it's not his fault,” Mom said.

Dad shook his head. “It was bad.”

I sat with my parents and watched the rest the families mill around the field. I pointed people out and recited the paltry facts that defined their identities to me. “There's the kid who played Minecraft every day in English, and there's the girl who's always making out with her boyfriend behind the science building at lunch.”

Mom and Dad laughed with me over the old stories. I didn't want them to know what my high school life had actually been like, what I'd been through with Danielle. I wanted to sit here in peace together, watching how the rest of the world moved.

We were at the car when I remembered that my graduation cap was still sitting where I'd taken it off on the bleachers. I told my parents to wait for me and ran back to the field. I found the square, black cap near the top of the bleachers. The sun was setting, and a chill wind whistled through the metal. The light filtering through the clouds bathed the empty field in pink.

"Juno," a familiar voice called. I turned. Danielle was standing on the stairs below me, her hair blowing across her neck.

"Did you follow me?" I sounded angrier than I meant to.

"Kind of," she said. "I saw you come up here, and I thought I should say something before you leave. In case you don't come back."

"What is it?"

She took a step towards me, cautious as a cat approaching its prey. I was looking down at her for once.

"Just say what you want to say," I said.

"I'm scared."

"Of me? If anything, I should be scared of you."

"You saw me at my worst. That's terrifying."

"Being friends with me was your worst?" She didn't speak for a moment. I bet she wanted to say yes. I was just a regret to her.

"I lost sight of why I'm here. I'm supposed to teach, not be your friend. But you're still wonderful, Juno. I've always thought that."

Her compliment did nothing to ease my pain. "What about Ari, then? How come you act normal around him and you won't touch me with a ten-foot pole?"

“Our relationship isn’t the same as what I had with you. I’m there for him because he needs me.”

“I need you too.”

“Not as your best friend. Someday you’ll understand that what I did was selfish. I used you to escape my own life. You’re eighteen, you shouldn’t be burdened like that.”

“You were never a burden. You made me excited to wake up every day. I’m never going to meet someone who understands me like you do.”

Danielle looked even sadder hearing that. “Someday you will, and they’ll be the same age as you, and they’ll make you happier than I ever could.”

I didn’t believe her.

“Tell me,” I said. “Did you only become my friend because your wife left you?”

She was silent for a long time. “I was swallowed by loneliness after Kristen left, but when I talked to you it thinned enough for me to take a breath. I could focus on something other than my own mistakes. And you were so happy to spend time with me. I thought, maybe I am worth something, at least to this girl. But I never wanted you to replace Kristen. I never wanted this to be more than a friendship.”

“I know.”

“It didn’t make much difference in the end, did it?”

I said nothing. She knew I agreed.

“I swear now that Ari’s graduated, I’m not going to talk to him anymore,” Danielle said. “I don’t care how much he texts me. It ends here. I’m not going to treat any more students like I treated you.”

“Do you really mean it? You’re not going to do this again?”

“Yes. Absolutely. No more spending time alone with students, or talking about their personal lives, or sharing secrets with them. It’s all over.”

I had long since accepted that my friendship with Danielle was inappropriate, but now, hearing her swear that she wouldn’t treat another student how she’d treated me, I felt relief, and I knew that what she’d done was wrong. All my happy memories with her were shifting into black and white, becoming evidence for a crime that I was supposed to be the victim of.

I should’ve hated Danielle in that moment, but I couldn’t. The only thing she did wrong was love me when she wasn’t supposed to. How could I be angry at her for that? When I looked at her, I didn’t see a predator. I saw my best friend.

My mother’s voice rang out from far below, calling my name.

“You should go,” Danielle said. “Go to college, forget about me.”

“It’s not that easy.” The Homecoming dress, that day at the beach, the many nights spent talking together—those memories were so strong it was like I lived them every day. “I’m going to miss you.”

“You shouldn’t.”

“I can’t help it.”

Mom called my name again, echoing out through the deserted school. I descended past Danielle, brushing her skin for the last time as she stepped aside to let me go.

When I reached the bottom, I looked back. She was sitting where I’d sat with my parents less than an hour ago. I knew she would sit there many more times, watching class after class walk across the stage. She was as much a part of the school as the field, the classrooms, or the worn concrete of the halls. As I drove away in the backseat of my parent’s car, I said goodbye to all of it.