

TAUGHT
A City's Secrets Novella

B. B. Hamel

Chapter One: Jim

I wished I hadn't fallen in love, but I did. I wished even more that I hadn't told her, but one day she began to slip away, and it was my only chance. I wished my heart wasn't broken, but it happens. Whatever. Life moves on, even when we don't want it to.

I was in love with Amy, and I confessed everything to her. The pain began to fade; it was over, and a lot happened since then. Still, her face, full of sadness and pity, is probably the lowest memory I have. I never wanted to be the kind of pathetic dude that admitted his undying love to a girl who didn't feel the same way.

Anyway, I had to make a few changes after that. The place where I worked, Swirl Café, was full of more memories about her. We worked together for over a year, and got pretty close over that time. Or at least, I felt pretty close to her, though she didn't exactly return my same feelings. So I quit that job and found a new one.

As it happens, it's pretty easy to get a job teaching college courses in music if the head of the department is your dad's oldest friend. I hadn't seen him in years, not since I was a little kid, but when I applied he immediately called me up and offered me a spot. It was a really simple introductory music theory class, but it was something different, and it was potentially a future. The pay wasn't great, and it was a lot of work, but there was nothing more rewarding than teaching people how to play. And it was better than moping around some shitty café, acting like a loser.

I found myself in the library more often than not. It was a huge concrete thing, three stories high, but I usually hung out in a back room on the second floor, books fanned out in front of me. I liked the silence and the solitude, and the unlimited supply of books wasn't bad, either. I passed hours like that between teaching, and sometimes even

on days that I didn't have any classes. I had always liked to read, but for some reason when I had access to thousands of free books whenever I wanted, I fell deep into the black hole of obsessiveness. That happened with me sometimes; I got hung up on new things, new objects, new activities, and I spent days or weeks or months doing nothing but learning everything there was to learn. In a lot of ways, my new things were what gave me a reason to exist. I was easily excited about the next big thing, but all too often I moved on, half finished with my latest craze. Those days, my thing was reading in general, and I devoured everything from the classics to science fiction.

One Friday afternoon, late into the spring semester, I was holed up in my usual room, a little hidden cubby toward the back of the second floor behind the historical fiction section. I had a bunch of old science fiction novels arrayed around me, stuff like *1984* and *Animal Farm*, but also things I'd never heard of, like *Double Star* by Robert Heinlein and *Dhalgren* by Samuel Delaney. I was half way through the dizzyingly weird opening of *Dhalgren*, wondering what exactly was happening, when some girl knocked at the door.

I shouldn't say *some girl*; it was more like, the hottest fucking girl I'd ever seen. I was an adjunct professor, but I was still a professor, and so I had to hold myself back from socializing with my students too much. But that girl, I couldn't help but stare at her through the foggy glass window. Her eyes were a deep blue and her hair was auburn. Her full lips were pouted in this annoyed-but-still-sexy look that was irresistible. I was too busy staring to motion for her to come in, which she did on her own eventually anyway.

When she opened the door, my breath caught in my throat. She was probably a few inches shorter than me, and was wearing tight jeans with a simple black Metallica T-

shirt and thick-rimmed black glasses. She was slim, but not skinny, and my eyes ran along her body, surprised at the curves and movements of her hips. Her lips were full and pink, and her skin was a creamy pale. Her hair was long, probably down to bottom of her breasts, which I couldn't help but notice were full. I felt like a pervert taking her in, but I couldn't tear my eyes away from her. She was fucking fantastic. And she had this disgruntled look on her face, all screwed-up and pissed, which I found beyond hot. I badly wanted to gently pull her hair until her mouth opened, and then press my lips against hers.

“Uh, excuse me?” she said, finally snapping me out of my trance. I kept picturing what she looked like wearing only those glasses, but I had to pretend like I wasn't.

“Yeah, sorry. Can I help you?” I said. Her face was stern, and I noticed she had a restocking cart parked behind her. I guessed she worked at the library, but wasn't sure.

“You're not supposed to be in here.”

I let that sink in for a second. I'd been coming to that room for a while and had never been bothered before. As far as I knew, it was one of those rare places that very few people knew about, or at least very few people who cared to use it.

“I'm sorry, is this reserved?” I asked. Her eyebrows furrowed, and her annoyance intensified. She looked cute, staring daggers at me. I grinned at her, picturing how she'd look straddling my lap and slowly sinking down onto my hard dick. I felt my cock begin to stir and had to force myself to cool it with the dirty thoughts.

“It's meant for staff only, it's supposed to be a sorting room.”

“Like where you guys put the kids into their houses?” I said.

She stared at me, either not a fan of Harry Potter, or not in the mood for lame jokes. “Sorry, not my rules.”

I closed *Dhalgren* and started to gather the books I had around me. “Sorry about that. I’ll go read somewhere else,” I said.

She continued to stare at me for a second, and then sighed. “Look, you can stay. Just, don’t leave anything in here.”

I paused, and looked at her again. Her face had softened, but she was still clearly annoyed. I wanted to apologize again and ask what her name was, but I felt weird breaking through that student-teacher boundary, despite how sexy I found her. She probably didn’t realize I was a professor, or at least I didn’t think that I looked like one, but still. I decided to keep it professional, at least for the time being.

“Alright, I’ll put this stuff back. Promise.”

She nodded, and then left. The door clicked shut behind her, and I was alone again in a cinderblock room with one too-bright fluorescent light and the smell of old, musty books. What normally was a refuge from the world suddenly felt drab and empty. I picked my book back up and started to read again, but my mind kept wandering back to that girl and her body and the way she stared at me like I was the biggest asshole in the world. I wanted to hunt her down and pin her against the stacks until she was begging for more. I wanted to run my hands along her body and feel her heavy breath against my neck.

I settled for reading instead.

Chapter Two: Emma

I thought love was for suckers. There was something so infuriating about all those love struck teenagers, those over-the-moon idiots with their big dewy eyes and their desperate need for attention. I had never been in love and didn't plan on it; my only goal was to graduate on time with the best grades possible. I had a few good friends and a decent job at the library. I didn't need some idiot guy messing that up.

Plus, my family had high expectations for me. I didn't want to fail. I never had before, and I didn't plan on starting. Love was a distraction, one I didn't plan on getting involved with.

It was late into the semester when all of that changed.

I caught him reading in the Staff Only sorting room. It was supposed to be for sorting out the huge stacks of books we had to return, a quiet spot to think and figure out where everything was going to go before putting it onto the cart. I had been working at the library all semester and I had never seen him before, so I was pretty sure he didn't work at the library. When I knocked, all he did was stare at me, which really pissed me off. I mean, there was clearly a sign right next to the door stating "Staff Only," and yet he felt like that didn't apply to him? What an asshole.

Whatever, it shouldn't have been a big deal, but I was already annoyed from having gotten a mediocre grade on my French exam earlier that day, and I was probably looking for someone to take my frustration out on. I seriously wasn't normally such a dork and a jerk, or at least I didn't think I was, but something about him that caught me off guard.

Initially, he was nothing special, at least through the foggy glass window. He was in shape and had light skin, and his brown hair was unkempt. I guessed he was a grad student, or maybe a young professor. He definitely wasn't an undergrad student, not with the wrinkly white dress shirt tucked into equally wrinkly slim fitting khaki pants. I had to admit, he was pretty cute, in the absent-minded-professor kind of way, but he was in the wrong place at the wrong time.

Eventually, I opened the door on my own, and all he did was continue to stare. He wasn't even subtle about it: his eyes ran up and down my body with this smug look on his face. Part of me wanted to slap him, but I kept it cool instead.

“Um, excuse me?” I said.

He looked startled, like I was the one intruding or something. “I'm sorry, is this reserved?” he asked.

Was he joking? It was clearly marked. I couldn't believe this idiot hadn't noticed the sign. Or maybe he thought I was the idiot, which really pissed me off even more.

“It's meant for staff only, it's supposed to be a sorting room,” I said, and hoped he heard the biting annoyance in my tone.

Then he gave me the most annoyingly cute grin I had ever seen. His whole face seemed to light up, and it sent a weird jolt through my system.

“Like where you guys put the kids into their houses?” he said.

Was he kidding me? A lame Harry Potter joke? Okay, maybe it was a little funny, and it was adorable how much joy he took in his stupid joke. But I was in no mood to indulge the guy, and so I continued to stare daggers at him.

“Sorry, not my rules,” I said.

He closed what he was reading and continued to look at me. He started to gather the books he had arrayed around him when I noticed what he had been holding. *Dhalgren* by Samuel Delaney was one of my favorite books. It was this totally long and weird postmodern science fiction novel about a post apocalyptic town with some really weird features. It was totally circular and bizarre. Lots of kinky sex, too, which helped balance out some of the more boring parts. It wasn't exactly a popular book, and I had to admit that I was impressed with his choice.

"Sorry about that. I'll go read somewhere else," he said. Suddenly, I felt bad, and realized I was being a complete jerk to this guy for no reason. He didn't mean any harm, and I doubted anyone on staff actually used that room for anything anyway. I shouldn't have taken out my own frustrations on him, and my guilt overwhelmed my duty to the library.

"Look, you can stay. Just, don't leave anything behind in here," I said.

He smiled and gave me this weird look I didn't understand exactly. "Alright, I'll put this stuff back. Promise," he said.

I gave him a shrug then turned and left. There was something about him I couldn't place. He was definitely cute, and clearly had okay taste in books, but it was something else. It kept bugging me as I pushed my cart away, back into a different part of the library. It had to do with the way he stared at me, like I was something special he had never seen before. Part of me wanted to go back there and talk to him some more, maybe apologize for being so bitchtastic, but I had a lot of work to do.

And besides, falling for a guy was stupid. I didn't need his lips anywhere near my body, even if that was what I wanted.

Living with my best friend made college easy. We'd been friends for as long as I could remember, and when it came time to choose where we were going to college, the decision was easy when we both found out that we got into Temple. We lived together ever since, and never looked back.

Lane was crazy in the sort of way that made you want to be around her. She was outgoing, beautiful, and fun. Boys flocked to her like seagulls on a hotdog, and that suited me perfectly. She was thin and brunette, with deep brown eyes and tan skin, the kind of girl you saw modeling swimsuits. She was a long distance runner in high school, and although she stopped running competitively, she still kept her training up. That meant her body was fantastic, muscled but still full in all the right places. I wasn't really jealous of the attention she got since I was never really that into meeting guys. In fact, if anything, she pulled all their attention away from me, and that worked out perfectly. I was studying pre-med and my only goal was to get into graduate school at the University of Pennsylvania. That way, when graduation rolled around, Lane and I could still live together in the city. It helped that Penn was a fantastic school, too.

After my shift that night, I walked into my apartment to find Lane sitting on the couch with Dillon watching some awful reality TV show about child dancers. Lane met Dillon our freshman year in the dorms, and he became part of our little group ever since.

"Sup Emma," Dillon said.

“Hey guys,” I replied. Lane gave me a big wave. I dropped my bag by the kitchen table then went over and flopped down between them. Dillon snuggled up against my arm.

“What’s this crap?” I asked.

“It’s called Dance Moms, and it’s all about these wacko ladies teaching little girls to dance way too sexy,” Lane said.

I laughed. “So why are you guys watching?”

“Uh, it’s hilarious and those little girls are fabulous and Lane doesn’t know anything,” Dillon said.

I laughed but didn’t say anything, knowing better than to get involved in a dispute between Lane and Dillon. They were both fantastic, but they could also be the bitchiest people alive for the pettiest reasons. I wasn’t in the mood for an hour of sideways sniping at each other.

“How was your shift?” Lane asked.

I didn’t reply right away. I realized I had been thinking about the guy from the sorting room for most of the night, and was annoyed that he had crawled into my brain. The way he stared at me was both creepy and exciting, and his taste in books was pretty good. It didn’t hurt that he was attractive, too. I still wasn’t interested in anything, but he was the first guy I had met since coming to college two years ago that I was even remotely interested in, and I had no clue why.

“It was pretty good,” I said.

“Pretty good? Usually it was ‘awful’ or ‘terrible’ or ‘boring as hell,’” Lane said, perking up. “What happened?”

“You meet some hogtie in the stacks?” Dillon asked.

“No, I didn’t meet any guys,” I said, too defensively.

Lane jumped all over that. “You did meet someone cute, didn’t you?”

“I didn’t meet anyone,” I said, lamely. I knew it was too late. Dillon and Lane sensed my hesitation like a drop of blood in water and, like the insane social sharks they both were, they would ruthlessly hunt me down until I spilled my secrets.

“Don’t even pretend,” Dillon said, sitting up as well.

“Spill it,” Lane said.

“Guys, it’s seriously nothing.”

Lane stared at me, her face a mask of anger. “How dare you say it’s nothing? How dare you?”

Dillon jumped in immediately. “You’re tearing this family apart, Emma.”

“You’re never interested in guys, and the one time you find a cute one, you won’t even talk about it?” Lane was a pro at playing the fake-martyr. I knew I was in way over my head.

“Fine, alright, I met a guy. Well, I yelled at a guy.”

“Oooh, yelled how? Like, ‘stop talking this is a library, now get in my pants’ kind of yelling?” Dillon asked. He was the least subtle person I had ever met.

“Yeah Dillon, I basically forced myself on him.”

Lane laughed. “Seriously, who was it? What did he look like? Tell us everything.”

I shrugged. “It was just a guy. Probably a grad student. He was reading in one of the staff only sorting rooms, and I asked him to leave.”

Dillon groaned. “Seriously, you asked him to leave? You’re such a rule follower.”

“I let him stay, though,” I said. “I don’t follow every rule.”

“That’s right, you totally don’t,” Lane said, sarcastic.

“Hey, you guys want to hear more?”

“Yes please!” Dillon said. “We’ll be good, just go on, you sexy librarian.”

I sighed and ignored Dillon’s comment. I had to give them the full dish or else that was all I’d hear all night. “Anyway, he was weird, stared at me when I first came in. Basically eye fucked me, I guess. I asked him to leave, and he was about to, but then I saw he was reading one of my favorite books. He was kinda cute, so I don’t know, I let him stay.”

They stared at me after I was done talking as if they were waiting for more. I gave them a little smile and a shrug, and hoped we could drop it.

“That’s it? What did he look like?”

“Cute. Brown hair.”

Dillon let out a deep, fake sigh. “You are the worst person in the entire world at describing people. Seriously, Emma, I am appalled.”

“Yeah, I have to admit I’m with Dillon on this. Truly horrendous.”

I laughed. They were always pretending like they were on opposing sides of some war, and for the most part they were, but really I knew they liked ganging up on me more than anything else.

“What do you want me to say? He was wearing a button down shirt and khakis. He was attractive or whatever. And he had good taste in books. He was reading *Dhalgren* and that’s like my favorite.” I shrugged again.

“Typical of you to be more detailed about his reading selection than about his bod,” Lane said.

“So what happened, did he ask you out or something?” Dillon asked.

“Nope, I let him stay in the room, then I left. I’ll probably never see him again. End of story.”

Lane and Dillon both let out huge fake groans and leaned back into the couch.

“This is worse than the time Dillon had a thing for that straight dude in his Psych class.”

“Hey, I totally got vibes from him. Plus, his ass was fantastic,” Dillon said, grinning. “I would have changed his mind about dick.”

Lane fake-gagged and I laughed, then they started bickering about Dillon’s ability to turn straight men. I was glad that the conversation had moved away from me. As they began to dissect the poor straight dude’s butt in detail, I drifted off into my own thoughts. I wondered why I had never seen that guy before, since he so clearly was a big reader. I usually worked the third floor, but had a guess that he stuck to the second for some reason. That was good; it meant I’d probably never have to see him again. I’d never have to spend another minute wondering who he was, what else he liked to read, where he was from, all that boring, relationship stuff.

Eventually, the topic switched from Dillon’s straight crush to another reality show I’d never heard of, and I used that as an excuse to retreat back to my bedroom. I switched on the light and changed into more comfortable clothes before putting on an old Miles Davis record that my dad gave me. As the sound of his trumpet oozed from the speakers,

I opened my biology textbook and tried to study, ignoring the thoughts about the guy from the library that kept popping up to break my concentration.

Chapter Three: Jim

It was late, and the campus felt empty. The streets always thinned out about an hour after dinnertime on the weekdays; most undergrads were either eating late, or they were in their dorms studying like the good students they were. Or they were at the bar drinking under age, either way, they weren't out along the bike paths as I walked toward the library. The night was cool and comfortable, and I liked the solitude. The lunch trucks were closed or closing for the night, but the library was still brightly lit. I thought I had at least an hour before they kicked me out, so I showed my I.D. to the security guard and climbed the main staircase up to the second floor. I noticed the elevators weren't working, although I wouldn't have taken them anyway.

It had been a week since I last saw that girl, though I hadn't gone searching for her. I had this recurring fantasy that involved intricate flexibility and those return carts the staff always had. As I walked, the stacks were empty save for a few scattered kids deep in books. I had to admit, Temple students weren't all cliché college bros, drinking lots of beers and acting like idiots. For the most part, they were smart and studious, and I got along with most of them. There were some jerks, but there always would be.

I slipped through the rows of books and found *Dhalgren* again. I pulled it from its place and carried it back toward my usual spot, the cubby toward the back of the floor. I couldn't believe I never noticed the little "Staff Only" sign, but nobody had ever bothered me before that girl, so I guessed it didn't really matter either way. I opened the door and set myself up at the table again, part of me hoping that she would show up. As much as I hadn't wanted to, I spent all that week thinking about her. There was something about

her, something that made her stand out from all the other students I dealt with every day. She was serious, or maybe it was how hot she was. I had to remind myself over and over that I needed to be careful. It wasn't technically wrong for me to date her, since she wasn't my direct student, and I was only a few years older than she was, but dating a student of any kind was definitely frowned upon. Plus, it wasn't exactly dating that I wanted to do with her. I was still too new to teaching to do anything to mess up my position, especially considering it was the first job I felt really good about in a long time. I kicked my feet up on a chair and opened the old, cracking spine. I found the spot I last left off and fell into the world: no more pretty girls, no more teaching stress, no more self. There was only the story.

I didn't know how much time had passed, but the next thing I knew, there was a loud knock at the door. I nearly jumped out of my chair as I looked up and saw her: the same girl, the same annoyed expression, staring in at me.

I got up, shut the book, and opened the door. "Hey there," I said, grinning like an idiot. I realized I was excited to see her and had to will myself to calm down.

"Library's closed. You should have left like a half hour ago," she said.

Shit. Was for she real? I checked my watch and sure enough, I had fallen so deep into my reading that I hadn't noticed the time.

"I'm sorry, I got distracted," I said, holding up the book. Her eyes narrowed.

"You're a fan of Delaney?"

I shrugged, looking at the cover. "I guess. I've only read this one, but I really like it so far."

"*Dhalgren* is one of my favorite books."

“Seriously? It’s a pretty weird sci-fi novel.”

She looked pretty annoyed at that. “What do you mean, seriously? Yes, I like that book.”

“That’s not what I meant.”

She cracked a small smile and shrugged. “It’s fine. But you still have to leave.”

I nodded and walked out of the room. She stepped aside for me to pass by, and I felt a thrill at being so close to her. It was a strange feeling, entirely out of my control, like my body knew what it wanted before I did.

“What’s your name, by the way?” she asked.

I stopped and looked back at her. She was wearing tight black jeans and a white, button down shirt. Her glasses topped off the cute but seriously nerdy look. She had a sexy librarian thing going on, her thin cotton shirt barely holding back her full breasts, and I wanted to tear the buttons from their holes and let her skin spill out.

“I’m Jim. What’s yours?”

“Emma. Are you a grad student, or what?”

I laughed. “No, I’m an adjunct in the music department.”

She grabbed her book cart and started to walk. I took a few steps and matched her pace. “So you teach music?” she asked.

“Yeah, music theory. What year are you?” I said.

“I’m a Junior, studying pre-med.”

“Going to be a doctor one day?”

“That’s pretty much the goal.”

“Impressive, that’s a tough major. You must be smart.”

She laughed. "I guess. I could be an idiot you know, get terrible grades and stuff. Anyone can study to become a doctor."

I grinned. "That's true, but something about you says you're a good student."

She rolled her eyes. "It's the glasses, isn't it?"

"Yep, it's the glasses. Makes you look very studious," I said, teasing. I suddenly realized I was flirting with her, despite having told myself not an hour or two ago that I'd never do anything to jeopardize my position at the school.

"Maybe you're right then," she said.

We walked a bit further in silence until we came to the end of the stacks. We lingered there over her empty cart for another second.

"So, I need to drop this cart off, then I'll walk you out."

"You don't need to, it's no big deal."

She shrugged. "Okay. The elevators aren't working right now, so you have to take the stairs."

There was another short silence. I didn't want to leave, but I knew I should. What I really wanted to do was take her into an empty study room and learn every inch of her skin. We both lingered for an awkward moment.

"Okay then. Have a good night," I said.

"Yeah, you too," she said. Her face was deadpan and I wondered if she was annoyed that I was using that room again. She hadn't said anything about it, though.

I walked off without looking back, and pushed through the first stairwell I came to. The image of her face peering at me through her glasses wouldn't get out of my head. I walked down the steps at a near jog, trying to outrun my mind's obsessive need to think

about every inch of her. I bet she looked incredible, her auburn hair spilling around her bare shoulders as she slipped my cock between her lips. I shivered, feeling my cock stir again. What was wrong with me? I had to relax. I hit the bottom of the stairs, realizing I was in an unfamiliar spot, and tried to push through the door.

The door was locked. I tried it again and again, but it wouldn't budge. Cursing, I walked back up the steps, and tried the door I had just come through. That was locked as well.

Panic started to rise in my gut, but before I let it overtake me, I walked up to the third and final floor. I took a deep breath, tried the door, and nearly kicked the damn thing when I realized that it was locked. I leaned my back against it and let out a long breath, not sure what to do. Like a fucking idiot, I had gotten myself locked in a stairwell, and I didn't bring my phone with me, because I didn't like a distraction when I was teaching. I pounded on it some more, but nobody heard me, or at least nobody came and opened it.

Then I remembered her. She couldn't have been too far from the doorway, and she might hear me if I knocked and yelled loud enough. Hopeful, I started down again.

Before I got further than a step, I heard a door below me open. I hurried my pace, nearly falling down the slick concrete.

"Hey, wait," I yelled, skidding down and around the corner. Up ahead, I saw Emma coming through the door, and she looked up at me like I was an insane person trying to attack her.

“Wait, hold that door,” I yelled, but it was too late. By the time she realized what I was talking about, the door clicked shut behind her. She turned, a confused look on her face, and tried to push it open. It didn’t budge. She looked back at me and cursed.

I stood next to her on the landing, catching my breath, my stomach sinking, as I realized we were locked in together.

Chapter Four: Emma

I couldn't believe I got myself locked in a stairwell with that weirdo. When I saw him an hour before the end of the night in the sorting room, reading *Dhalgren* again, I wanted to kick him out. I stood there debating what to do for what felt like ten minutes, but I eventually gave up and walked away. I figured he'd leave soon enough on his own anyway, and besides, nobody ever used the room. I put him out of my mind as I went back to shelving, counting the painfully slow-moving minutes until my shift ended.

As I was closing up, for some reason I decided to check and make sure the idiot knew the library was about to be locked. Sure enough, there he was, still engrossed in his book. I couldn't completely blame him; it was a really good read. Still, he was oblivious to everything around him.

He turned out to be okay. He was an adjunct professor, not a grad student, which made him a little bit cooler in my mind. His name was Jim, and he was a little funny, but still cocky. I offered to walk him out, in case the night guards gave him shit for still being around passed closing, but he declined. I didn't feel like pushing the issue, and he took off after a nice weird awkward pause.

I couldn't let myself get hung up on him. It was definitely a coincidence that the two times I had worked on the second floor he'd been in that same room. It was definitely meaningless that I thought he was cute, and felt butterflies in my stomach when I looked through the window on the door and saw him reading stretched out across two chairs. It's not like I was a little kid or something; I didn't get crushes like that. I wheeled my cart into the storage room and lined it up with the others, still ruminating about our weird

conversation. Without thinking too much about it, I decided to take the back staircase since it spit me directly outside instead of having to walk through the main foyer.

As soon as I pushed open the heavy door and stepped into the staircase, I heard a familiar voice. I looked up, confused, as Jim tore around the corner.

“Wait, hold that door!” he called. I had no clue what he was talking about, and by the time I thought to turn around and push the cross bar, nothing happened. I pushed again and again, and nothing.

“Are we fucking locked in here?” I said.

He took a deep breath, and then let it out. “Yeah, we are.”

“You have to be kidding me. Are they all locked?”

He nodded. “They’re all locked.”

Shit, that had to be a joke. I ran up to the third floor and pushed the door. Locked. I ran back down to the first floor and pushed the door. Locked. I kicked it and yelled, but I doubted anyone would hear me. Jim sat down at the landing between the floors and looked at me.

“Do you have a phone?” he asked.

“Yeah, don’t you?”

“I leave mine at home when I teach. Can you call someone?”

Right, that was a fantastic idea. I pulled my phone from my bag and scrolled through the contacts. I could call Lane, and if she got there fast enough, the night guards could let us out. I found her name and tapped the call button, then waited.

I got her voicemail. I cursed, and tried again. I got voicemail again, cursed louder, and called again. I got voicemail for a third time, and was ready to smash my phone.

“You okay?” Jim asked me.

“I’m fine, but my friend isn’t answering.”

“Is there anyone else you can call?”

I realized how incredibly frazzled I was to be stuck with him. I kept glancing up at him, at his handsome face and attractive smile, and wanted to run my fingers through his hair. Nodding, I scrolled through my phone, and called Dillon.

“Sup bitch,” he answered.

“Jesus, am I happy to hear your voice,” I said, relieved.

“No shit, I’m fantastic. What’s up?”

“Dillon, please come to the library. I’m stuck in a stairwell.”

There was a short pause. “Are you joking?”

“No, I’m not joking. Me and this other guy are stuck in the back stairwell. All the doors are locked.”

“You and ‘this other guy,’ huh. Is he cute? Should I take my sweet time?” There was a playful tone in this voice. I looked up at Jim, who was watching me intently, and felt myself blush.

“Seriously Dillon, not the moment for jokes. Please just come find a guard and get us out of here.”

“Chill, I’m on it. Dillon, knight in shining armor, coming to the rescue.”

I let out a breath. “Thanks Dillon. See you soon.”

“Now go get your flirt on girl,” he said then hung up.

I locked my phone and put it away. “My friend Dillon is on his way.”

Jim nodded, still watching me closely. I felt a little weird to be the subject of such an intense gaze, but part of me liked it, too. I wondered what was running through his mind.

“Thanks for doing that,” he said.

I walked half way up the stairs closer to him, and then sat down, my back against the wall.

“Yeah, I mean, it was either that or spend the night in here with you.”

“I guess that would be horrible,” he said, grinning.

I gave him a look. “You could be a murderer for all I know.”

He laughed. “You could be a murderer too. Or worse.”

“I work here, you’re just a random guy.”

“I teach here, remember?”

“You have a point there, Jimmy.”

He shook his head. “Nobody calls me that.”

I shrugged. “I guess I’ll be the only one, then.”

I had no idea why, but I realized I was flirting with him. Really childishly, too, and I was afraid he would see right through me. I didn’t have much practice if I was honest with myself. I’ve had boyfriends in the past, but they were all temporary, and none of them lasted very long, either. I usually lost interest or I was too busy to put much effort into keeping them around. They inevitably got sick of being second to my studies, and wandered off. I was never very upset about it. At a certain point, getting a boyfriend naturally became a secondary concern, pushed off into the margins of my life.

Not that I wanted this guy to be my boyfriend. As my pulse began to quicken, I realized I wanted something from him, but I wasn't sure it was a relationship.

"So what are you doing with the rest of your night?" Jim asked me after a short silence.

"Why, so you can stalk me?"

"Just trying to make friendly conversation," he said.

I glowered at him. I shouldn't be such a dick for no reason, it wasn't his fault I suddenly was imagining what his lips tasted like.

"Probably studying," I said.

He nodded as if that was what he expected. "Like I said, you seem like a good student."

"I'm not always a good student."

He smirked and raised an eyebrow. "Yeah, and what's that mean?"

I blushed and looked away. "Nothing, I was kidding."

"Where are you from, anyway?" he said, changing the subject.

"Valley Forge," I said. "Pretty small town, not a lot to do out there. You?"

"Lancaster. I know a thing or two about not much to do."

"That's pretty much the country."

He laughed and ran his fingers through his hair. It was an endearing habit, and I guessed he didn't realize he was doing it.

"Yeah, it is. I'm pretty much a country boy."

"How long have you been teaching?"

"Not long, actually. I needed a career move and gave teaching a try."

Teaching college courses wasn't your typical "second career" kind of job. He must have been either incredibly talented or really well connected to get an adjunct position teaching classes without some prior experience.

"How do you like it?"

"Better than managing a café," he said, rolling his eyes.

"You're too cute to be working at a café," I heard myself say.

I had no idea what came over me, or what I was thinking. I probably was too busy picturing what it would be like if he stripped off my clothes in the shadows on the first floor and went down on me then and there. I wasn't the type to fantasize about some random guy, but there was something about his proximity, the way he carried himself, and the books he read. I was attracted to him without even realizing it.

His face broke out into a large grin, and I blushed. "Thanks, I think," he said.

"I mean, the people working at those places. You know what I mean?" I didn't know what I meant, but I hoped he did.

"Totally. I'm taking it as a compliment."

"Sorry, that was weird."

He shrugged, still smiling. "If it makes you feel any better, I think you're the perfect amount of cute for a library."

I laughed. "Now what does that mean?"

"Not sure, but it's a compliment."

"Obviously," I said, grinning. I felt less embarrassed, and also a little flattered.

Part of me wanted to squeal like a teenager, and part of me was totally disgusted that I was excited by this random guy calling me pretty. It was a totally exciting and

confusing moment, with the fact that we were locked in a stairwell together only intensifying everything.

“How’d you end up working in the library?” he asked.

“Luck mostly. I like to read, so I applied. That’s pretty much it.”

“Fascinating story.”

“Why’d you start teaching?”

He looked away. “Not sure, honestly. The head of the music department is a good friend of my dad’s, so he called me after I applied, and things went from there.”

I nodded. “That makes sense.”

He looked at me oddly. “What do you mean?”

“I mean, teaching college isn’t really a fallback career, you know?” I said, trying to explain.

He nodded, a small smile on his face. “You’re absolutely right. I’m really lucky.”

“I’m sure you’re a good teacher, too.”

“You don’t have to be a good teacher to run a college course, but it helps.”

“I bet all the undergrad girls throw themselves at you.”

He gave me a wicked smile at that. “Like you are?”

“Oh yeah, you wish. You’re too old for me.”

He looked offended. “I’m not old.”

“What are you like, thirty?”

“Are you kidding?”

“Thirty-five.”

“I’m twenty-seven.”

“You’re practically in the grave.”

He laughed. “Okay, what are you like, fifteen? Still listening to Justin Bieber?”

“I’m twenty-one,” I said proudly.

I was old for my year because my birthday fell right on the line between my grade and the grade above, and my parents decided they’d rather me be older than younger compared to my classmates. I also didn’t want to admit that yes, sometimes I did listen to Justin Bieber, thanks very much. “Baby” was catchy as hell.

“You’re practically in diapers.”

“I’d rather be in diapers at a young age, than diapers at an old one.”

We both broke out laughing at that, and the tension diffused. He really didn’t look twenty-seven; I would have guessed a few years younger. His face was boyish but handsome, and his clothes, although meant to evoke a serious professor-type, made him look like a kid playing dress-up. It wasn’t a bad thing actually, but it was clear that he felt more comfortable in something else, and I found myself speculating on what exactly that was. He was fit, not bulky but lean and muscular, and I could tell that he kept himself in pretty decent shape.

“So what do you do outside of work?” I asked after the laughter died down.

“I’m in a band. I mostly just play music and teach, I guess. I’m pretty boring.”

“Sounds boring. What’s the band?”

“Honest Mystery, we play like indie rock stuff.”

“Local shows?”

“Yeah, we have a gig coming up soon actually, this weekend.”

“Where at?”

“Johnny Brenda’s, if you want to come check us out.”

It took me a second to realize he had actually invited me to see his band, which was both sweet and a little lame. Every random musician had a band, and I wasn’t sure I was interested in hearing his probably-terrible music. Then again, if he was teaching music theory courses, he had to know at least a little something about writing a song.

“Yeah, maybe I will,” I said.

“Cool. We go on at 10 Saturday night. Stop by if you want.”

“So that’s all you do? Band and teach?”

He laughed. “Yeah, pretty much. What about you?”

Aside from working at the library, drinking wine with Lane and Dillon, and studying my ass off, I pretty much didn’t do anything. At least he had music to fall back on for an interesting hobby; I was a studying and work machine, more or less.

“I read a lot, I guess. I hang out with my roommate, Lane. I don’t know, I guess I’m pretty boring too.”

“Is that who’s coming to get us, Lane?”

“No, that was Dillon, our fearless gay leader.”

He laughed. “What’s that mean?”

“He’s basically the social director for the three of us. I think without him, me and Lane would sit around watching The Office reruns until we died.”

“That’s not a bad way to go. I could watch Dwight pepper spray Roy all day long.”

“That’s like my favorite scene,” I said, genuinely surprised.

“Seriously? It’s mine too.”

“I love when Dwight is a normal human for two seconds.”

He laughed. “Especially when he ruins it a second later.”

It was weird. We had all these favorite things in common. I had never met someone I clicked with like that so quickly. He stood up and walked down a few steps, sitting with his back against the wall, opposite to me. We were pretty close together, our knees practically touching, but I was still too busy grinning about his Office reference that I didn't mind.

“What are your other guilty pleasures?” I asked.

“Let's see. Big Bang Theory, which is basically just like a typical sitcom, but I love it. Girls, Game of Thrones, and Looking are all good.”

“I love Game of Thrones,” I said.

“You strike me as a Tully.”

“Oh yeah? You're a Lannister if you're anything.”

“Damn right I'm a lion.”

“So you're cool being the villain?”

“There are no straight up villains in Game of Thrones.”

I laughed. “Yeah, that's true.”

“You'd fit in at Westeros. It's basically a world full of hot people, according to the show at least.”

“Good one,” I said, and although it was the lamest compliment I had ever been given, I was oddly excited. I hadn't been in a straight up nerdy conversation in a long time.

“Weird how much in common we have,” he said quietly.

I nodded. “It is weird. I’m still surprised I found someone else with the same taste in books.”

“I like them long and strange, I guess.”

“Just like you like your women?”

He grinned. “Exactly.”

He shifted his weight toward me, and my heart started to pound. It suddenly hit me how trapped we were, with nobody around, just this strange guy who shared the same taste in books and trashy TV as me. A really cute guy, who I was strangely attracted to, despite his cocky comments and his lame jokes. Our conversation trailed off as our eyes locked, and I felt myself spiraling down into his deep brown irises, wondering what there was to know about him, and realizing I wanted to know everything. I felt my breath come deeper as the excitement started to run up my core, and I swore he started to lean toward me. I wanted him to come closer, and felt myself tense for his boy, for his soft lips, for his taste.

As he got nearer, and my lips parted slightly, the door below us banged open, and we both jumped, startled. I straightened my back and shifted away from him as a security guard, followed by Dillon, poked their heads inside.

“Saved you, bitch!” Dillon yelled, and the security guard gave him a bemused look. I guessed that wasn’t his first inappropriate comment.

“Dillon! My savior,” I said, full of sarcasm. I looked at Jim and he grinned back. I cursed Dillon for his awful timing, and wished he had showed up maybe ten minutes later than he did.

“Let’s get you out of here,” Dillon said. I stood and walked down the steps, and Jim followed.

“Who’s this tall drink of water?” Dillon asked.

“I’m Jim,” he said, and they shook hands. The four of us walked outside and onto a small side path along an alley. We thanked the guard profusely, and he just shrugged and walked off, probably on his way back to reading from an old paperback. Security gigs at Temple weren’t known for being high stress situations.

We stood in the cool, dark night under the Bell Tower. I looked at Jim and wanted to say something, maybe ask if he wanted to go to dinner, but Dillon made things weird. I knew there was a moment back there between us, but that moment was suddenly gone, lost in the wash of the real world we had walked out into. Trapped in a staircase with a handsome stranger, I could let myself indulge in fantasies of my lips pressed up against his, but out in the real world I had obligations and studying to get to.

“Well, it was nice getting trapped with you,” Jim said.

“Yeah, you too. Let’s never do it again.”

“Maybe see you around?”

“Yeah, sure.”

“Bye guys.” He gave us a wave, and then headed off toward Broad Street. Dillon and I stood and watched him for a second, before heading off in a different direction, toward my apartment.

“You totally want that cute ass,” Dillon said.

“Stop, he’s a teacher.”

“Oh fuck yeah, are you kidding me? How hot is that?” Dillon was beside himself with excitement. Part of me figured that if I weren’t into Jim, Dillon would take a crack at him regardless of whether he was gay or not.

“He’s just a nice guy, that’s it.”

“Coming from you, that’s practically admitting you want to carry his babies.”

“Seriously Dillon, cut it out. It’s not like that.” I punched his arm and he laughed at me.

“Fine, I get it, first crushes are always the most awkward. You do know what to do with a boy, right?”

“One more word and I’m banning you from our place.”

“Okay, okay, keep it together. I’m dropping it.”

He changed the subject for the remainder of the walk home, and told me about a new boy crush he found on Grindr, but I was barely listening. I kept thinking back to that interrupted moment in the staircase. I thought he was leaning in to kiss me, but I wasn’t sure. More than that though, I realized I wanted him to kiss me, and wouldn’t have stopped him. It was nuts, I barely knew the guy, and had thought he was a total loser not an hour ago, but there I was suddenly ready to suck face with him. I had to pull myself together.

As I kept walking, and Dillon kept blabbing, I realized I hadn’t smiled that much in a long time.

Chapter Five: Jim

We got to the bar early to set up our equipment. Andy and George came with me, and we all hoped Tom would show up, but we never knew anymore with him. We had been discussing whether or not we should replace him for weeks, and if he missed the gig, it was a done deal. Johnny Brenda's was a really good venue, and the 10p.m. slot was the second best of the night. Granted, it was only their local bands show, but still, there were plenty of Philly bands that would have killed to get on stage that night. We were all excited and hoped that there were some talent scouts out in the crowd, but nobody was talking about it. Instead, it was all fine-tuning our gear, chatting about the list, and stressing about the crowd.

After the amps were plugged in and the guitars tuned, I sat at the bar with George while Andy went outside to call Tom. I glanced around the crowd, thinking about Emma; I hadn't seen her since that near-kiss in the stairwell. I had no clue what came over me, why I would invite her, or why I would try something like kissing a student. But it happened, like I was suddenly outside of myself, or at least it almost happened. I'll never know if she would have kissed me back, but she wasn't pulling away at least.

I couldn't get her out of my mind. It wasn't exactly inappropriate, but maybe that made it more exciting. Part of me hoped she wouldn't show up, so I could let the whole thing go, but part of me wanted to catch her eye in the crowd. I wanted to see that fucking sexy frustrated look again.

“What’s up man?” George said, pulling me back into the night. The bar was hot and loud, partially full, but not yet packed. It was an hour before we went on, and I already felt like I needed to change into a less sweaty shirt.

“Nothing really,” I said.

“You seem a little off tonight.”

“Guess I’m distracted.”

“Well, get your shit together, it’s a big show.”

I nodded. George was right: I couldn’t afford to obsess. We had been working hard on our songs for the past few months, and there was some pretty good buzz out there about us. A lot of it came after we changed our name from Slimmer Pickings to Honest Mystery, which I guessed was catchier or something. Still, it was a big show for us, a huge step up from the usual spots.

“I’m fine, don’t worry about it,” I said. I was the lead guitarist and backup singer; George played bass, Andy played drums, and Tom played rhythm guitar and was the lead vocalist. If he didn’t show up, I wasn’t sure what we’d do.

Andy slipped his way through the crowd and stood next to George.

“Tom’s running late,” he said.

“Fuck, he’s such an asshole,” George said.

“What’s his excuse this time?” I asked.

Andy shrugged. “Got a flat tire, apparently.”

That was possible. Tom had been living with a girlfriend outside of the city, so he had to drive in to make our gigs.

“He’d better get here soon,” George grumbled, and went back to drinking.

I scanned the crowd again, half convinced that every cute, young girl I saw was Emma. I sighed and went back to my drink, trying to keep her smile out of my head.

George counted us down. The lights were bright and hot, and as we began to play I felt high and exhausted all at once. We sounded good; Tom showed up and was mercifully neither drunk nor high for once in his useless life. I had to admit, though, that when he was on stage, Tom was the best front man I had ever seen. He was personable, high energy, had a good voice, and could play his instrument. He put on a show for the people, and he didn't just strum. If he could get his shit together, he'd go somewhere, with or without us.

I kept my eyes on the middle distance and focused on my playing. As soon as I hit the first note, everything but the songs drifted from my mind. No Emma, no money problems, nothing, just the rush of making music in front of people. The crowd seemed pretty into it, as far as I could tell. We powered through our first song, an up-tempo power rock anthem meant as a tribute to old school glam bands. As we hit the final note, and Tom began to banter with the crowd a bit, I looked over the faces looking back at us, and out toward the bar.

My heart nearly stopped: sitting between a guy I recognized and a girl I didn't was Emma. We locked eyes for a second, and I was positive she smiled, until Dillon pulled at her arm. I quickly looked away as George counted us down for the next song, and we began to play.

I couldn't believe she showed up. After the stairwell, I had gone back to the library every day until closing to try and run into her again, but I hadn't seen her anywhere. I wandered around the first and third floors as well, but as far as I could tell she wasn't working at all. It was possible she only worked Tuesdays, but I guessed something else had happened. I figured that would probably be the last of it, that I had scared her away so completely with my tactless move. I had become the creepy teacher trying to seduce a student, even if I was just an adjunct, and she wasn't one of my direct students.

But I was wrong, and she had come. Maybe I was still the creepy teacher, but she clearly didn't mind it, or at least liked me enough to come out and hear the band. As we hit the bridge of the second song, my heart began to pound in my chest, and my body was flooded with even more adrenaline. My voice was featured in that part, and I suddenly found myself giving a shit about what I sounded like. I was self-conscious knowing she was out there in the crowd listening, and I wanted to impress her.

The next few songs flew by. As far as I could tell, it went smoothly. I didn't notice any mistakes from George or Andy, and Tom was his usual proficient self. My own playing was pretty good, although I couldn't keep myself from dwelling on Emma in the crowd. I kept glancing out at her and looking away, trying to catch her in my peripheral vision, trying to gauge whether she was having fun or not. The crowd was reacting pretty well; people were up and dancing, which was usually a good sign. As we finished, Tom made his usual end-of-the-set jokes, which always got a laugh, and we were out. The crowd clapped and cheered, louder than I expected, and my body was

drenched in sweat. My heart hammered as we moved off and into the small backstage area.

“Fuck yes, we killed it,” Tom said ebulliently. He was practically glowing. Tom was a huge pain in the ass, but he was a damn good performer.

“That went pretty well,” Andy said, his usual dour self.

“It went pretty fucking well,” Tom said again. We slipped out through a side door and stood in the cool night air, gathering ourselves together.

“It was pretty good,” I said, trying to play it cool.

Tom laughed and clapped me on the back. “Sorry again for being late, guys.”

“It’s fine, I’m just pumped because that went so well,” George said.

“Lot of hot chicks in the crowd.” Tom laughed and waggled his eyebrows.

“Yeah man, plenty of groupies,” Andy said.

I laughed. “I’m sure maybe five of them had ever heard of us before.”

“I’ll say fifteen, I’m feeling optimistic,” George joked.

“All right boys, no more bullshit,” Tom said.

“What, you want to be serious now?” George laughed.

Tom shook his head. “I want to thank our great and merciful Lord Xenu, first and foremost.”

I groaned and punched his arm. Andy rolled his eyes and George laughed harder. Tom just grinned and shrugged his shoulders.

“I’m getting a drink, catch you guys later.” I went to walk back into the bar.

“Where the fuck are you going?” Tom said. “We’re having a post show band bonding session. You’re not wandering off.”

I cringed. Tom's idea of bonding usually involved drinking until one or more of us blacked out and vomited. Years ago, when I was younger and more reckless, that might have seemed like a good idea. But as I got older, especially with Emma sitting inside, I didn't want anything to do with Tom or his bonding. Or his vomit, but that was a given. Nobody wanted anything to do with Tom's vomit, regardless of their age.

"No thanks, man." I walked off toward the front entrance.

"Don't be a dick!" Tom called after me, but I ignored him. I turned the corner and took a deep breath, gathering myself.

"What's going on?" I nearly jumped as George appeared next to me.

"Don't sneak up on me like that."

He gave me a weird look. "I didn't sneak, I jogged. You seem pretty on edge."

"Sorry, I guess it's my adrenaline."

"You want to finally enlighten me, or do I have to go get hammered with Tom and never learn your secret?"

I laughed. George was my closet friend in the band, and probably outside of the band as well. He was pretty good at reading my moods, and that night was no exception.

"There's a girl here I want to see," I said.

He nodded, his face grave. "That's very good, Jim. Had my questions about you."

"Oh shut up. She's a student at Temple."

"Isn't that like, against your rules or something?"

"Not exactly. She isn't my direct student, so it's not illegal or anything. Plus, I'm not really sure there's anything between us yet."

George shrugged. "But you might want there to be something."

“I’m honestly not sure yet, but I guess that’s why I’m going to hangout with her.”

George nodded. “I’ll cover for you with Tom.”

I squeezed his shoulder. “I appreciate that, man.”

“Just make sure you get it in, like, tonight.”

“You were so close to being a good guy.”

“Can’t get too soft on you,” he said, grinning. “Good luck.”

“Thanks,” I said, and started back toward the bar.

I had to admit that I was a little nervous. I realized it was a little weird, but it made total sense to me. All those strangers, I didn’t care what they thought about me individually. I did care about them as a crowd, but I wasn’t nervous about any single one of them. I could get up there and play and know what I’d sound like because I had practiced over and over, and I wasn’t worried about making a mistake. But with Emma, it was all unrehearsed. For whatever reason, I cared about what she thought of me. The crowd was just a crowd; there would be plenty more crowds in my life.

But Emma, she was unique. I’d never have another Emma.

Which was exactly why, despite the unusual nervous fear and excitement swimming around in my veins, I had to go into that bar and find out if there was anything between the two of us.

Chapter Six: Emma

I couldn't believe Jim's band was decent, but they were. Even Lane and Dillon liked them, and they hated everything. The venue was packed and hot, and we were lucky to have spots at the bar. When Jim came on, the crowd went nuts; I think they actually had more than a few fans out to see them. Jim played lead and sang backup, and he wore slim dark blue jeans and a tight black T-shirt that showed off his surprisingly fit body. I kept picturing him as the buttoned-down adjunct, but on stage he looked much less boyish, and much more in control. I had to admit that I liked it.

"Holy shit, he looks delicious," Dillon yelled in my ear. I winced at the word "delicious," but I had to agree. In my mind, I saw his face coming closer to mine, his soft looking lips and his deep eyes, and I felt a jolt of desire run through me again.

"Yeah, seriously, you didn't say he was hot," Lane said.

"I told you he was cute." I took a drink, feeling awkward.

"Cute does not do him justice." Lane grinned. She was beyond excited that I had finally met someone I was interested in, and she plied me with questions every single day since I got home that night. Of course, Dillon spilled the beans immediately, and they instantly teamed up to pull out every possible detail. I probably wouldn't have showed up if it weren't for Lane and Dillon pressuring me into it. Sitting at the bar watching him play, I was glad they did. I had to admit, Lane was right: "cute" didn't do him justice.

"I think he just looked at you!" Dillon practically screamed, grabbing at my arm. I had spaced out remembering their incessant joking and comments, and when I focused on the stage, his gaze had shifted over to the other side of the room.

“Probably not, it’s dark in here.”

Lane rolled her eyes at me.

“I am beyond, beyond, beyond fucking jealous. A hot rocker professor? Are you kidding me?” Dillon said. He was probably more into Jim than I was.

But he did have a point. Jim seemed exactly like my type: mature but not stuffy, literate but not pretentious, and attractive in an all-American kind of way. It was a bonus that his band was decent, and that he looked incredibly sexy on stage.

“Relax, Dillon. He probably doesn’t even remember inviting me.”

I hadn’t been to the library all week because I had switched out my shifts already in anticipation for a big Civics exam on Friday. I studied pretty much day and night, and luckily didn’t have too much time to dwell on whether or not he was into me. As soon as the test was over, though, I began to obsess over every detail of my time in the staircase with Jim. We couldn’t have been in there for very long, but it felt like weeks. Everything he said and every motion he made was somehow charged, amped up past the normal level of social contact. He was like a lightning rod at the top of a high building, attracting electricity and distributing it along his length.

He really was a hot rocker professor. More than that, I was pretty sure he was into me, or at least he was when we were trapped on that staircase. His band switched songs, and I found myself getting sucked into the music. Jim was obviously talented; I liked music a lot, and listened to a huge range of genres, so I knew a thing or two about good stuff. His guitar style was like Jimmy Page, and his voice was like early Ben Gibbard. The front man was electric and wild, but he was basically a rip-off of mid-career Mick Jaguar. Jim had something else, something special. He was a bit stiff on stage, but his

playing was phenomenal. The front man definitely had the right swagger, but he was missing the technical side of music. Jim may have been backup, but he was definitely the star, or at least the band wouldn't have been elevated beyond mediocrity without him. There was something special about the ease with which he played.

They launched into their next song, and I nodded my head along to the beat. Lane and Dillon began to argue about which bartender was hotter, so I tuned them out. I couldn't keep my eyes off of Jim, especially when he began to sing. There was something about his voice that I found irresistible, and even though it was overwhelmed by the front man's screaming croon, I could still catch snippets of it wafting through the background.

Finally, their set ended, and the front man made a terrible joke about the encore being for all the single ladies back at his place. It got a surprisingly loud laugh, plus an enthusiastic round of hoots and clapping. As far as a local, no-name band goes, they killed it with that crowd. People were dancing, and I thought I saw a few singing along, and the applause afterwards was loud and heartfelt. I expected a shitty, lame group of old guys playing bad music, but they were actually pretty great. Even if I never saw Jim again, I would probably have followed his band.

"They were fucking awesome," Lane said loudly.

"Yeah, I'm shocked. You said he was pretty dorky," Dillon yelled in my ear.

"Not dorky, just a dork."

"What's the difference?" he said, making a face.

"I don't know!" I yelled over the music. Jim and his band filtered off toward the backstage and disappeared outside as the venue staff started to break down their equipment and set up for the next band.

“You should go talk to him,” Lane said.

“No, that’d be weird.”

“Oh don’t be scared, we’re here for you,” she said, laughing.

“That’s the problem!”

Dillon and Lane were fantastic, but they could get a little overzealous sometimes. I wouldn’t want to bring a guy around them because they’d pepper him with embarrassing questions and make it seem like I was a crazy person. They meant well, but it was a little intense sometimes.

Dillon looked offended, but he was always offended about something. “We are fantastic people, Emma Trainer, don’t you ever forget it.”

I grinned. “I couldn’t forget even if I tried. You remind me *all the time*.”

He nodded seriously. “You’re damn right I do.”

Lane broke in. “Enough bullshit. Shots!”

Dillon joined in her calls for shots, and I reluctantly agreed. Lane ordered three whiskeys, which wasn’t my favorite, but would do the job. I glanced through the crowd but couldn’t find Jim anywhere. Maybe he had left with the band for a different after-show spot. I was a little disappointed, but I guessed it was for the best that way. If he wasn’t into me, then we wouldn’t have to do the awkward ‘Oh hey you came!’ meeting. We could skip right back to being strangers.

The bartender handed over our three shots, and Lane distributed them. She held up her glass. “To Emma, for finally trying to get some sweet man meat.”

I made a 'nice one' face, and then we all downed our shots. It was my first drink of the night, so the burning warmth of the whiskey hit my stomach hard. Dillon made a grossed out face, and we all laughed at him.

"Celebrating something?" someone said over the music, right behind me.

I looked back at Jim, standing there grinning at me. For a second I was at a loss for words. He was even cuter off stage than he was on, or maybe that was just residual rock star still clinging to his image. His shaggy hair was damp with sweat, but his deep brown eyes were bright and clear.

"We are celebrating," Dillon said.

"What's that?" Jim responded, looking at Dillon.

"Nothing, ignore him," I said, turning my body toward him.

His smile grew bigger and I caught him running his gaze along the front of me. Normally that would have creeped me out, but for some reason I could tell it was completely unintentional. And it was cute that he couldn't help but check me out. I felt my body flush with his nearness and gaze.

"I'm glad you came," he said.

"Me too, you guys were awesome."

"Thanks, I appreciate it. Can I buy you something?"

Lane gave me a big grin, and I nodded. "Sure, just a gin and tonic."

Jim moved away against the bar and tried to catch the bartender's eye while Dillon and Lane both waggled their eyebrows at me. I was plotting how I'd murder them slowly when Jim came back with my drink and a beer for himself.

"So have you guys been here before?"

“It’s my first time,” Dillon called out.

“Yeah, none of us have been here before,” I said.

“It’s a pretty cool venue. Been here for a while now too, it’s like a Philly institution at this point.”

“Do you guys play here often?” Lane asked.

Jim shrugged. “Not that often, actually.”

“Well, I thought you guys were awesome. What’s the name of your band again?”

Lane asked.

“Honest Mystery,” he said.

“That’s a good one, who came up with it?”

He grinned. “I did, though I sort of stole it from a novel Father John Misty wrote.”

“Who’s that, your Rabbi?” Dillon asked.

Jim and I both laughed, while Lane and Dillon exchanged a look.

“He’s a musician,” I said.

“Yeah, totally weird, like an L.A. new age shaman or something.”

“Like Jim Morrison.”

“Exactly! But if him and Frank Sinatra had a baby,” he said, grinning.

“Not as pretty though,” I joked.

Dillon and Lane continued to exchange looks, but I was too busy laughing with Jim to really care. He seemed to perfectly understand my sense of humor, and our jokes were easy to riff off each other.

“What are you guys doing after this?” Jim asked the group.

Lane shrugged and looked at Dillon. “We’re probably not doing anything, but I don’t know about you two.”

I blushed, and Jim smiled at me. It was only a matter of time before Lane or Dillon said something awkward that totally made me look like a crazy clingy stalker or something. And they wondered why I never brought guys around. Well, that was because I was never interested in anyone, but still. They would have scared them off regardless.

“Well in that case, want to walk around or something?” Jim asked me.

I wasn’t sure what he meant by ‘walk around or something,’ but Dillon was giving me a look, and Lane was practically itching to answer for me.

“Yeah sure, whatever,” I blurted out.

“Cool, let’s finish our drinks.”

“To new friends!” Dillon cried out, and then chugged what was left of his first drink. We all laughed at him, and Lane joined in the chugfest. Jim and I both sipped a little more conservatively. I wasn’t into getting wasted, which was why I was trying to stay at or below two drinks. Dillon and Lane, on the other hand, embraced all things college and cliché, and were definitely down to black out from time to time. I was usually the designated driver as far as our nights out went. I was also the mother, the taxi-payer, and the general practical person.

When Lane vomited, I took care of her. When Dillon vomited, I made him go home. We had a pretty good system.

“To be young again,” Jim said, laughing.

“How old are you anyway?” Lane asked.

“I’m twenty-seven.”

“You don’t look twenty-seven,” Dillon said.

“What do you teach?” Lane asked.

“I’m in the music department, adjuncting right now. I teach intro to music theory classes.”

“So you’re not a real professor?”

He laughed. “No, I’m not, not at all.”

“Good, real professors are so lame,” Dillon said, rolling his eyes.

We all laughed. “Do you like teaching?” Lane asked.

He nodded. “Yeah, I do. I wasn’t sure I would, but I guess I’m pretty good at it.”

“Do you like your students?”

“More or less,” he said.

“All right, enough grilling him,” I cut in.

“What? We’re just trying to get to know our new pal,” Dillon said defensively.

I looked at Jim and he smiled back as he finished his drink. I could tell he didn’t mind fielding their questions, but I was one more awkward comment away from being full-on embarrassed. Lane and Dillon seemed to be holding back, but I decided it was time to get out of there before they went too far.

“Want to get going?” I asked him.

“Sure, whenever you want.”

“Leaving so soon? We just got started,” Lane said, grinning.

“You can resume the interrogation another time,” I said.

“You kids be good!” Dillon yelled. I stood up and shrugged at Jim. He smiled.

“It was good meeting you guys,” he said to Lane and Dillon.

“You too,” Lane replied. Dillon waved as Jim and I walked back toward the exit. The next band was getting started, and most of the crowd was up toward the stage, so we had an easy time slipping out the front entrance. We spilled out together into the cool night air, the wash and thud of the live music following us out. We stood by the curb and I grinned up at him, feeling butterflies in my stomach.

“I’m really glad you came,” he said again. I stood close to him.

“Yeah, me too.” He reached out and took my hand in his. I felt a thrill run through my stomach, like a cliché schoolgirl, but I couldn’t help it. I was getting all worked up because a boy played in a band and wanted to hold my hand. I couldn’t stop myself though, and truthfully, I didn’t want to. I was afraid to get involved, but I loved how he made me feel.

He faced me in the street, his lean, tough body close to mine, his face inches from mine. Adrenaline flooded my body and my pulse quickened as he moved closer, and began to lean in. I saw the outline of his soft lips in the streetlight, his shaggy hair layered over his handsome, boyish face, and a deep thread of panic began to unwind inside of me. Distractions, work, and more bubbled to the surface as he drew nearer.

I wanted his taste and his touch, and I squeezed his hand, terrified.

Chapter Seven: Jim

We stood outside of the bar on the curb. She was beautiful, radiant, absolutely drop dead gorgeous, and she was looking back at me like I was the only person for miles.

She was fucking hot, as Tom would say.

I was a mess of conflicting nerves, scared that our relationship could jeopardize my job, but overwhelmingly attracted to her. The easy buzz of alcohol in my stomach helped loosen me up, and while I wasn't anywhere near drunk, I did feel like I had the confidence to do what I'd wanted to do since the stairwell.

I took her hand in mine and squeezed it softly. Her skin was smooth and creamy white. I moved closer, feeling her body close to mine, her eyes wide and her mouth slightly parted, and I began to lean in to kiss her. I noticed she wasn't wearing her glasses. My heart was hammering through my chest, faster than the up-tempo beat of the music spilling out of the bar. I could almost taste her soft lips and feel her breath.

"My bike," she said quietly. I stopped, inches away from her face.

"Your bike?" I asked.

"My bike," she repeated more loudly. "I rode my bike here."

I blinked at her for a second. Was she joking? I straightened up, a little confused. I was getting all the right signals; I knew she wanted me. And yet she was pushing back again. Well, if she wanted to play, I'd play.

"Oh, yeah, that's cool. I rode here too, actually."

"Cool. I mean, that's good."

"Yeah. I'm parked over there," I said, nodding to a bike rack.

“Me too,” she said and laughed awkwardly. I let her hand drop. I didn’t really understand what just happened. Everything seemed good, I was getting all the ‘kiss me’ signals, or at least I thought I was. Then she brought up her bike. I shook my head, at a total loss for what to think.

“How’d you guys get your equipment here?”

“George drove it over in his van.”

“That’s pretty cool.” There was a silence between us.

“So, yeah, still want to hang out?” I asked.

She perked up. “Definitely. Where are we going?”

That was a good question. I hadn’t actually thought much farther than wanting to spend some time with her. There were a few good bars in the area, but for the most part it was a total wasteland between Johnny Brenda’s and Temple’s campus. We could have gone south, toward Old City, but it was getting late and I didn’t want to drag her all over the city. Suddenly, it hit me, the perfect spot to take her.

“Have you ever been in the secret garden on campus?” I asked.

She shook her head. “That sounds fake.”

I laughed. “It does sound fake, but it’s totally real. Let’s go.” I walked over to the bike rack, found my bike, unlocked the U-lock, and then pulled it out. It was an old red thing, a twelve-speed road bike from the 70s.

“Cool bike, where’d you get it?” she said.

“Found it in the trash.”

“Seriously?”

I nodded. “Yep, some guy in the suburbs was just throwing it away one day. Pulled over and took it right there.”

“That’s amazingly lucky.”

I patted the seat of my bike. “Sure was. She’s been with me ever since.”

Emma laughed then found her own bike, and slid it out from the rack. Hers was clearly newer than mine, a single speed thing with a white frame and pink pedals. Dangling from her lock was a cute yellow helmet, which she proceeded to strap to her head. I gave her a little grin.

“Better safe than sorry,” she said.

“You look cute in it.”

She smiled, and used her hands to model the helmet like she was Madonna doing the vogue.

“Fantastic, runway material,” I said. We laughed and climbed onto our bikes.

“Follow me.” I angled out into traffic, heading west, and I heard her following.

I took it easy, not sure how comfortable she was riding in the city, but I quickly realized I had no reason to go slow. She easily kept pace, and even sped passed me when I was playing it safe at stoplights. Soon enough, I was following her up 13th street, back toward campus.

The night was comfortable and quiet as we rode side by side. The streets were dark, and I felt freer than I had in a long time. There was something about riding a bike at night, with so few cars on the streets and no people around. I was the king of the city flying through town next to a beautiful girl. The air whipped through our hair as we moved faster, and I never wanted to stop pedaling. The houses flashed by, each with a

different door, and filled with different people, the space around us a pocket of joy and quiet, the only sound coming from our breathing, our bikes, and the wind. I could go anywhere I wanted without worrying about anything. Cities were built for riding a bike at night. Our bikes were tiny worlds in themselves, and riding them revealed something new about the place we lived.

Soon we were on campus. We passed by the dorms called Thirteen Hundred, and sped down across from the Student Center. I moved ahead of her, and banked left toward the business school building. I could hear her right behind me, keeping pace but letting me lead. I took a sharp right and coasted down a short service road that led toward the loading docks. I went passed parked trucks and stopped at the end of the drive. Ahead was a dirt path that led to the backside of the building.

Emma stopped next to me, and we climbed off our bikes.

“I fucking love that,” I said.

“It’s my favorite part of living here,” she said quietly.

I looked at her, and had the stupid desire to try and kiss her again. More than that, I wanted to press her up against the side of the loading bay’s door and fuck her brains out. I didn’t care if we got caught. I knew it was too soon, and anyway she had already turned me down once that night. I motioned toward the path.

“It’s just down here.”

We walked a few feet and took a bend around the building.

“You’re not going to murder me back here, are you?” she asked.

I laughed and looked around. I had to admit, it was a very murder-friendly area.

“No, don’t worry. I got my murdering done earlier in the week.”

“Oh, good. I’m lucky you’re proactive.”

The path ended in an open courtyard, mostly blocked by the building on three sides, with only the dirt path as an entrance. The space was an open courtyard, with a small statue in the middle, and flowers and shrubs planted all around the perimeter.

“Wow, I had no clue this was here,” Emma said softly.

“I told you, secret garden.”

We walked into the courtyard and dropped our bikes. I sat down with my back to the statue and gestured around me.

“Welcome to the best kept secret on Temple’s campus.”

“It’s really pretty.” She craned her neck back, looking up at the building.

“Even better during the day.”

She looked back at me and smiled then sat down next to me, our knees nearly touching.

“What’s this statue?” she asked.

I shrugged. “I have no clue.” We both stared at it for a second. The statue was of a man on a horse, but he wasn’t wearing anything special, just a suit and a tie. He looked old fashioned, but he could have been still alive, too. There was no plaque to say who or what he was, and there was nothing distinguishing about him to give any sense of what time period he was supposed to represent.

“That is, without a doubt, the most boring statue I have ever seen,” she said.

I laughed, having come to that same conclusion myself. “I have no idea if he’s supposed to be a Civil War general, or just a dude from today that loves horses.”

“I know! Why wouldn’t there be a plaque here?” She scrambled up onto her knees and turned her body, searching the statue. As she moved around its side, she suddenly lost her balance, and began to tip over. I moved fast, not thinking at all, and grabbed her by the hips to steady her. She ended up with her hands against my chest, our faces inches apart.

We stared at each other like that for a second. I could feel the warmth of her body and her smooth skin where her shirt was pushed up from the fall. It was an awkward position, but we held it quietly. After a second, she pulled away.

“Sorry about that,” she mumbled.

“Yeah it’s cool,” I said, pretending to brush myself off. It was all I could do not to slip my hands down along her body and feel the warmth between her legs. I felt my dick respond to my dirty thoughts, and took a deep breath to calm myself.

“So uh, how’d you find this place?” she asked me, obviously changing the subject. The touch of her skin lingered, and there was strange electricity there.

“I was just wandering around one day and found it.”

“Have you seen other people here?”

“As far as I know, we’re the only two people who ever experience this terrible statue.”

“Us, and whoever cuts this grass. And plants these flowers. And weeds. I mean, us and like fifty groundskeepers.” She grinned, and then added, “But who’s counting.”

I laughed and playfully pushed her shoulder. She grinned back at me.

“I thought it was special, but I guess not.”

“No, it’s still special,” she said, looking out at the flowers.

We were quiet then while we both looked at our surroundings. I glanced up at the building towering above us and imagined all the kids who walked through its halls, their individual stresses and anger and sadness and joy, all pressed into a single building. They were there to learn and they were there to get through the day or they were there for whatever incomprehensible reason kept them coming back. Meanwhile, outside their windows but hard to access, was a garden paradise. That night, though, the building was empty, and there wasn't a single light on in any of the rooms. We were really alone, even though we were in the middle of a campus that saw thousands of students every single day.

"Tell me something," I said, breaking the silence.

"What's up?"

"The first day we met. Why did you let me stay in that room?"

She looked at me for a second then shrugged. "I don't really know, honestly. I guess it wasn't that big of a deal."

"You were right to ask me to leave. I'm just wondering though."

She nodded. "I know. I don't have a good answer. It was probably your great taste in literature."

"Yeah, that's what I figured." I grinned at her. "So, what made you want to become a doctor?"

I wanted to keep her talking before we could lapse back into another comfortable silence. It wasn't that I minded not talking, but there was such a deep familiarity in the quiet. It was almost too intimate, sitting quietly in an empty courtyard, lit only by the moon and by ambient light from the building. We were intensely alone, isolated in a

beautiful spot, and I wanted to make sure she felt safe. Although she had already rejected me, I couldn't help but think there was a connection between us. There was something about her that made me want to slide my hands along the length of her skin and feel every inch of her.

She sighed and leaned her head back against the statue. "I'm not sure anymore. I guess both my parents are doctors."

"Yeah? Both of them?"

"My dad's a cardiologist and my mom's an OBGYN. Babies and hearts, the important stuff." She snorted and rolled her eyes.

"I take it you don't get along with your folks."

"They're fine, honestly. They're not bad people. Just pretty intense sometimes."

I nodded. "I get that. My parents are the opposite, which I guess is how I ended up twenty-seven and managing a coffee shop."

"What do they do?"

"My dad is a mechanic and owns his own specialty repair shop, and my mom is a full time hippie."

Emma laughed. "Full time hippie?"

"Yeah, they're both hippies honestly. My dad specializes in cars from the 60s, restoring and repairing them. He does other stuff too, but he's pretty well known for that."

"That's really awesome actually. Pretty much the opposite of my hard ass, uptight parents."

"At least they raised a pretty cool daughter," I said, looking at her.

She rolled her head toward me and smiled. “You think so?”

I nodded, shifting my weight toward her. “Yeah, I really do.”

She smiled and shifted toward me. Our faces were inches apart and my pulse quickened. She looked deep into my eyes and her mouth parted slightly as I moved closer again. This time, she didn’t pull back or speak, as our lips slowly pressed together, softly at first, and then with hunger. It was the hottest kiss of my life up to that point, as her perfect lips pressed hard against mine. There was something about our seclusion and about her pulling away from me earlier that made her taste that much sweeter. The work was definitely worth it in the end.

I gently ran my tongue against hers, heart hammering in my chest, starving for every inch of her kiss and her taste. I realized how badly I needed her, and how much I had been thinking of her. Ever since that first day, I hadn’t been able to shake her.

As we made out, she suddenly shifted her weight, and swung her leg over me. She straddled my hips, and I felt the warmth of her body through our clothes. She pressed herself against me, hips grinding down against my hard dick, and I kissed her rough, running my hands along her back. I pulled away and kissed her neck, and she let out a small, soft moan as I ran my fingers through her long hair. Her perfect hips ground down against my lap and I pressed myself close against her, letting her feel the full length of my shaft.

I pulled back, but before I could kiss her more, it suddenly hit me like a Mack Truck, directly in the chest: I was making out with a student. I was a teacher at that college and she was way younger than I was. I suddenly felt guilty and dirty and terrified for my job, but as much as I wanted to feel genuinely bad about it, I couldn’t. I may have

been breaking the rules, but I wasn't taking advantage of some kid for my own benefit. I was genuinely into her, and she seemed into me. My brain was fighting for control over my dick, and I could tell it was winning.

"Wait," I said breathlessly. I leaned in and kissed her hard again then pulled back. She looked at me, wide eyed, her mouth open. "Let's take this slow," I said.

She nodded, breathing heavy. "Yeah, we can do that."

It was the hardest fucking thing I had ever done. My cock was pushing up against my tight jeans and the only thing I wanted in that moment was to press her up against the statue and fuck her until we both came. Instead, the rational part of my brain decided it wanted to act out. I ran my eyes along her skin, lingered on her open mouth, and cursed myself for being such an idiot.

I wrapped my arms around her back then shifted our weight, rolling to our left, away from the statue. I landed between her legs, her back on the soft grass, and I felt the warmth of her core against my hardness.

"This isn't taking it slow," she said quietly. I leaned down and kissed her rough, and I felt her grind her hips against me. I couldn't stop, and I kissed her for what felt like hours, before slowly breaking away.

I was such a fucking asshole.

"I know, I couldn't help myself," I said. I kissed her one more time, softly, and then pulled away. I sat back and looked at her as she leaned over onto her elbow.

"So what now, professor," she said, smiling lightly.

I sighed. "I should probably explain."

She shook her head, eyes wide. "No, it's totally fine. I get it."

“Really, it’s probably not what you’re thinking.”

“Enlighten me, then.”

“Well, it’s the professor thing, basically.”

“What do you mean, professor thing? I think that’s pretty hot.”

I tried to play it cool, but a smile slipped through.

“Yeah, well, obviously,” I said, thrown off.

“Don’t get shy on me now,” she said, laughing at me.

“I’m not shy. It’s just, I work here. Relationships with a student are looked down on, and I’m pretty sure I can lose my job if anyone finds out I’m seeing you.”

She nodded, and seemed to understand. “So you want to keep this on the DL.”

“No, I mean, yes, a little bit. But I mean, we should take it slow at least.”

“I can handle slow.”

“Since you’re not in any of my classes, I don’t think it’s a big deal. But I really don’t know.”

“I’m not in any rush. I should probably focus on my studying right now, anyway.”

I laughed. “Yeah, it’s almost finals time, isn’t it?”

I shifted my weight and laid down next to her on the grass, my right arm behind my head. She relaxed down on my left side, and I slipped my hand into hers. We looked up at the sky, but the stars were blocked by the city’s lights. It was a large, dark expanse hanging above our heads.

I couldn’t believe I had stopped myself. I really couldn’t believe it. Inwardly, I cursed myself, frustrated that I had pulled back, and pissed that I had let the moment pass.

I was such a fucking pussy.

“Sometimes I wish we could see the sky better,” I said quietly.

“Yeah, me too. It’s probably the worst part of the city, all the light pollution.”

“Also the crime.”

“Yeah,” she said, laughing. “The crime sucks too.”

We lapsed back into a comfortable silence. I felt the warmth of her palm against mine, and breathed deeply the empty night air. I wished we could have extended that moment for longer, maybe not forever, but years at least. I didn’t want forever, because I needed to find out what came next. But I also didn’t want to get up and ride home with things hovering in the odd grey area we had found ourselves in.

“It’s getting late,” Emma said.

I looked toward her. “Yeah, you’re right.”

She let go of my hand and sat up, checking her phone for the time.

“Shit, how is it already 1am?”

I sat up and looked over her shoulder. “Wow, time flies, I guess.”

“Yeah, except I wasn’t having fun.”

“Ouch, that cuts me deep.”

She laughed as she climbed up to her feet. “Come on, rock star. Let’s get going.”

I stood up and smirked at her. “If you’re going to call me that, I’m going to call you my groupie.”

“I’m hardly your groupie.”

“I don’t know, you are throwing yourself at me after my show.”

She smiled and rolled her eyes, and then walked over to grab her bike. I followed, picking mine up, and straddled the frame as she strapped on her helmet.

“I’ll ride you home,” I said.

“You don’t have to.”

“Of course I do, it’s late.”

She didn’t answer, just started pedaling back the way we came. I followed behind her, marveling at her body on the bike. She wasn’t skinny, but she was athletic, strong and sure. I wanted to go back into that garden and grab her hips, feel exactly what her muscles were like when she came. I sensed another erection beginning to stir, and I forced myself to focus on pedaling instead.

We rode back onto the main road through campus then turned left toward Broad. We crossed over toward 15th, took a quick right turn into a small side street, and finally stopped in front of a red brick building. We weren’t far from campus at all, and the lights from the track still lit our path.

“Home sweet home,” she said, climbing off her bike.

“Need help getting that upstairs?”

“I’m going to lock it out here.” She pulled out her U-lock, took off her helmet, and locked her bike to the stoop’s railing.

“Okay, cool.” She looked around, an odd look on her face. I stepped off my bike, took a step toward her, wrapped my free arm around the small of her back, and kissed her hard. It was a deep kiss, hungry, and I didn’t want it to end. I tasted her mouth and soft lips, and felt her tongue run along mine. Finally, we broke apart, breathing heavy.

“Good night,” I said.

“Good night,” she said back, a little breathless.

I hopped on my bike and, with one more look back at her, I rode off into the night, heading toward my apartment.

Chapter Eight: Emma

“You fucked the professor last night?” Lane nearly screamed in my ear.

“No Lane, we made out.”

I had just finished telling her about what happened after Jim and I left the bar, about the ride through the city, about the hidden garden, and about our kiss. I couldn't get him out of my mind; the way he rode his bike with confidence, the hidden garden, his cocky grin, the way he kissed me and drove my body insane, everything was too much. If I wasn't completely crushing on him before, I definitely was after that night. I wasn't sure why I was so hesitant at first, but I found myself melting into him more and more.

“Yeah, but come on. You didn't just kiss.”

“He wants to take things slow.”

“Are you fucking kidding me?” she said, eyes wide. “He's perfect, dude. Lock him down.”

“He's worried about his job.”

“Yeah, that's an issue.” Lane looked pensive.

I moved across the kitchen and poured myself a glass of orange juice.

“Could he get in trouble for dating you?” Lane asked.

I gave her a look. “Nobody said anything about dating.”

“Are you kidding me?” She rolled her eyes.

“I don't have time, and plus, he probably would get in trouble.”

“But you're not his student.”

I drank some of my juice, and exaggerated a shrug. “I don’t know how it works, Lane. He’s worried, that’s all.”

“Listen to me, and listen good. That’s a hot rocker professor you have lusting after you. Don’t let that shit go to waste.”

Typical Lane. She was fun and my best friend, but a little short sighted. In her mind, this was the perfect opportunity for me. If I liked him, then obviously I should date him. But things weren’t that simple to me. I couldn’t bring another distraction into my life. I had pressures she didn’t understand, especially coming from my parents. They would be wrecked if I didn’t get into a good med school, and forget about not getting into one at all. I’d probably be cast out of the family if I got rejected across the board.

“We’ll see,” I said, trying to change the subject. She gave me another big eye roll.

I walked out into the living room and sat on the couch, legs folded under me, and pulled my laptop off the coffee table and onto my knees. I booted it up, typed in my password, and navigated to Facebook.

I scrolled through my feed for a while, clicking randomly on pictures, not really caring about what I saw. Facebook had become more of a habit than anything else. Suddenly, the little red notification for a new friend request popped up. I opened the tab and stared at the name: Jim Sleeter. His picture made it clear that it was my Jim, or at least the Jim from last night. Professor rocker Jim.

Oh wow. I couldn’t believe he had stalked me down already.

Flattered, I clicked accept, not thinking anything would come of it. I looked through his profile pictures, pretty average stuff, and scrolled down through his wall. It

was a pretty typical Facebook page, boring and generic, with the occasional funny picture of him or maybe a funny comment somewhere. I knew mine was more or less the same.

As I finished my stalk-session, a window popped up in the bottom right hand corner.

Jim: hey

I stared at the window for a second, my heart racing. My first reaction was to call for Lane and obsess over what exactly he meant, or why he messaged me at all, but I resisted those impulses. It was silly to obsess over one word. Plus, I was my own person with my own feelings, and I didn't need to act like a teenager with a crush, even if I felt that way.

Me: hey what's up?

Jim: not much. I had fun last night.

Me: yeah, me too. You guys were awesome.

Jim: haha thanks, but I meant after the show.

Me: I know you did :)

Jim: what are you up to today?

Me: not much I think. probably just hanging around the house. you?

Jim: not sure. George said something about a record label guy, but he didn't go into detail.

Me: woah, what?

Jim: I'm not getting excited, George is usually wrong.

Me: that could be huge right? do you know what label?

Jim: he didn't say. George is a little tough to deal with sometimes.

Me: ah that's frustrating.

Jim: yeah, but he's coming over. I should find out more soon.

Me: I'm sure it's a huge record deal. Multi-million dollar contract.

Jim: yeah, definitely. I'll be playing sold out stadiums soon.

Me: won't have time for me anymore

Jim: I'll work you in somehow, I always have space for cute girls

Me: oh good thanks, makes me feel special

Jim: hey I'm in demand now, you're lucky to get any time with me at all

Me: okay rock star, let's calm down

Jim: haha sorry, getting ahead of myself

I felt myself smiling like an idiot, staring at the computer screen. I glanced up and looked around. Luckily, Lane was busy playing with her phone, and didn't notice my stupid grin. Otherwise I'm sure I would be answering a million questions and parsing out every meaningless comment. I had to get a hold of myself.

Jim: so are you working this week?

Me: yeah, Monday Wednesday and Thursday, 6 to closing.

Jim: what time is closing again?

Me: ha, good one.

Jim: I'm just saying, you'd think working at the library meant you'd know which doors locked and which ones didn't

Me: keep it up mr. professor and you will be banned for life from the stacks

Jim: you don't have that power

Me: I definitely can make it happen. I know people.

Jim: I believe you actually

Me: good, you should believe me.

Jim: okay, I gotta go. George is here.

Me: good luck! Tell me what he says

Jim: what's your phone number? I'll text you

My heart skipped a beat. That was a big step in our relationship. Did I want him to have my number? I guessed I could always change it if he turned out to be a total creeper, but I didn't think he would be. Or at least I hoped not.

Me: it's 555-563-8832

Jim: cool. I'll text you

Then the green icon next to his face disappeared, and I assumed he shut his laptop. I looked around the room again, and found myself staring my phone, waiting for him to message me. He had my number, but his wasn't in my phone yet.

"God, I feel like such a little kid," I muttered to myself as I shut my laptop.

"What was that?" Lane said, glancing up from her phone. I looked at her and felt like a nut.

"Nothing, talking to myself."

"You going all crazy stressed Emma again?"

I laughed. She was referring to the year before when there were some particularly difficult tests all on the same week. I probably didn't sleep more than a few hours a night for the days leading up to them, and more or less lived in the library. I looked like a crazy cat lady, mumbling theorems and muscle groups to myself as I walked around the apartment. Lane said I stopped showering and gained twenty pounds, which was

completely untrue, but I did care a little less about my physical appearance. I lived in a uniform of sweats and sweatshirts, punctuated by Ugg boots and a jacket. In short, I was a mess.

“No, not crazy Emma this time.”

She let out a sign of relief. “Can’t be having that again, seriously Emma. I can’t deal with the stench and the insane comments.”

“I did not have a stench!”

Okay, maybe I had a slight stench, a very small smell, but I wasn’t proud of it, and I definitely didn’t need to admit to it.

Don’t judge me. College could be really stressful sometimes.

“Yeah, sure you didn’t, psycho.”

I grabbed a pillow and threw it at her as she sat at the other end of the couch. She let it bounce off her shoulder.

“Shaking the haters off,” she said. I laughed then stood up. Before I could walk into my room, my phone dinged loudly, and I nearly leapt through the roof. Lane gave me a weird, sideways look.

“You a little jumpy?” she asked. I ignored her and checked my phone. It was a message from a number I didn’t recognize. I swiped right and pulled it up.

10:45am 555-864-2651: hey it's Jim.

I added him into my contacts.

10:45am Me: so what's the news, rockstar?

“Hello? Who are you texting with that smile?” Lane said. I got the feeling that I had missed an earlier comment from her. I quickly locked my phone.

“Nobody, just a friend.”

“You fucking liar!” she exclaimed. “You’re texting Jim, aren’t you?”

I was not the best at hiding things from Lane, and I had absolutely no experience with keeping a boy from her. Actually, I had little experience with guys at all in the last year or so. Maybe I was getting rusty.

“Yeah, fine, it’s Jim. So what?”

“So what? Are you kidding, you gave him your number!”

“Of course I did. We made out pretty hard, remember?”

“Yeah, but that doesn’t mean you want to see him again. This is a huge step for you.”

I sighed. That was actually a good point. Just because we had hooked up for a little bit, didn’t mean he was my boyfriend or something. I wasn’t even sure I wanted to pursue him further, and yet there I was giving away my number and responding to him immediately like a lovesick puppy. I was pretty lame, but I couldn’t help it. I kept thinking about Jim’s hands on my hips, his soft lips and warm breath, and the confident way he took me through the city streets. It was sexy, the way he seemed to own the space around him.

“I don’t know what I want, Lane.” That was as honest as I could get.

“I hear you. Just go with it, you’ll figure it out eventually.”

My phone dinged again, and Lane grinned. “Not a word,” I said. She exaggerated zipping her lips and throwing away the key. I rolled my eyes at her bad joke, and retreated back into my room. I put my laptop on my desk and plopped down in bed,

letting the sheets wrap around me. I had those T-shirt sheets, the super comfy kind, and I loved laying around in them. It made getting out of bed in the morning really hard.

10:48am Jim: he says there was a guy from sub pop, and he's interested. Not sure I believe him yet but that could be huge.

Holy shit, Sub Pop was a huge indie label. I was immediately impressed and a little jealous. Although I didn't have any musical talent myself, I was really into the scene, and went to as many shows as I could. I was pretty familiar with the major record labels.

10:51am Me: sub pop! That's amazing! Are they interested in signing you guys or what??

10:53am Jim: I honestly don't know yet. George is being frustrating and vague. I'm pretty sure he was wasted when the guy talked to him, which is why he doesn't really know any details.

10:54am Me: that's hilarious. I'd be so pissed.

10:56am Jim: yeah but I'm used to it. Apparently the guy is going to call this afternoon, so I guess we'll find out more later.

10:59am Me: that's so exciting. Keep me updated.

I put my phone away and lounged back in bed, staring up at the ceiling. I was pretty torn at that point. His band was possibly taking off, or at least had a chance, and he was a professor at my college. All signs were pointing to us not pursuing anything. And frankly, I wasn't sure I was even that upset about it. He was cute, hilarious, a great kisser, had a fantastic body, shared the same taste in music and TV, and was confident in the

right ways. But I had promised myself that I'd focus on my studies, and not let some guy distract me. I had pretty constant pressure from my overachieving parents to consider.

There was no easy answer, as much as I wanted one. I had to consider my obligations and his reservations.

Either way, we were taking it slow, whatever it was.

Chapter Nine: Jim

“Who do you keep texting?” George asked me. I had a stupid grin on my face, and kept looking down at my phone.

“Don’t worry about it,” I said, not really interested in hearing all the douche-y things George would say. I knew him, and it was always the same: stuff about how badly I needed to hit that, how I was such a pussy for being into her, etc. Stupid frat boy crap. The sort of thing a guy who actually got any wouldn’t say. George didn’t mean any of it, but it was still annoying. He kicked his feet up onto my coffee table and changed the channel on the TV.

“I’m not worried, I’m curious.”

I sighed. No use fighting it. He’d bug me until I told him. And despite all that, he was still my best friend.

“It’s the girl from last night.”

He nodded sagely. “As I thought.”

“That’s it?”

“What else did you want?”

“Just expected you to ask if I ‘hit that’ or something.”

He snorted. “Look dude, ever since that Amy chick broke your heart, you’ve been moping around. I’m just happy to see you getting out there again.”

“George, that was surprisingly mature.”

He grinned at me. “Don’t get used to it. I’ll want all the gross details eventually.”

The problem was that I still wasn't sure there would be any details to tell him. It was true that I'd already crossed a line the night before, but it still wasn't too late to back out. We weren't exactly in a relationship, and we hadn't done anything we couldn't move passed. Sure, there was a strong attraction, and we had kissed, but we were adults.

Kissing didn't mean we were getting married.

"Nothings on," George mumbled.

"Go to your own apartment then," I said.

"Nah man, waiting on that call still."

I shook my head. I couldn't believe the idiot met a guy from Sub Pop but was too drunk to remember anything about what the guy said. I was glad George had come over early, though, because I didn't want to rely on him giving me all the details. I wanted to hear the guy for myself, or at least George's side of the conversation.

I stretched my legs out. I was sitting in a chair in the living room while George was sprawled out on the couch. My apartment was in a decent neighborhood, but it wasn't anything to speak of: one couch, one TV, a small kitchen, small bathroom, and a tiny bedroom. It was the best I could afford without being in constant debt.

My phone buzzed, and I looked down.

11:15am Emma: what do you teach again? Sorry, I can't remember

11:16am Me: why, planning on taking my class?

11:16am Emma: haha no, I think my friend does though

11:17am Me: intro to music theory. who's your friend?

11:18am Emma: her name is Nicole, and she's definitely in your class.

My stomach dropped. I had a Nicole in my class, and they were probably the same year. I could never be sure though. I could feel panic well up in my chest as I imagined Emma telling Nicole about the night before, and Nicole freaking out. What if she told an administrator? My teaching job would be over and done with in a second.

11:18am Emma: and before you freak out, I'm not mentioning last night.

I stared at that text. I guessed Emma understood my predicament, and didn't want to jeopardize my position. She was being surprisingly cool about it, actually. She had every right to tell whomever she wanted, and I would never try and control what she did and didn't do.

11:20am Me: thanks, I appreciate that. I know Nicole, she's a good student. How did that even come up, if you don't mind me asking?

11:22am Emma: she mentioned she had a cute music teacher, and I figured it was you.

11:22am Me: seriously?

11:23am Emma: hahaha no sorry. she just mentioned having a test in your class and used your name, so I figured I'd ask.

11:24am Me: ouch. well that's a funny coincidence.

I felt a little at a loss in that moment. Somehow, her knowing someone in one of my classes made things much more serious. I didn't want to completely freak out, at least even more than I already was, but I felt out of control.

Above all, I was torn.

Although I loved my job, Emma was the first girl I was remotely interested in since Amy Woodall had rejected me. I thought I was in love with Amy, really in love,

more in love than I ever had been before. But looking back on it, the only reason I professed anything to her was because she had left the café and was dating someone new. In contrast, Emma struck me immediately as someone I wanted to get to know. Amy had been like that, but I never really tried to pursue it beyond a friendship. I had to decide whether or not I wanted to follow that same route with Emma, or else wind up in the same pathetic position as before.

Before I could get too deep into the introspection spiral, George's phone started to ring. He lazily looked at the caller ID, and then suddenly sat straight up.

"I think it's them," he said.

"Who, the label?"

"Yeah man, Sub Pop. I think."

"Answer it!"

He swiped and put the phone up to his ear.

"Hello?"

I was on the edge of my seat, literally. I tried getting as close as I could, and maybe catch the other side of the conversation.

"Yeah, it was good meeting you, too."

George looked serious, which was rare for George.

"Okay, that'd be great. What time?"

"What are they saying," I whispered. He gave me a look.

"Sure, we can do ten in the morning on Wednesday. That'd be great."

I stared at him. Was he setting up a meeting? Why wasn't it on speaker?

“Yeah, sure. I’ll pass that along. Thanks so much. Yeah, you too. Looking forward to it. Bye.” He put the phone down in his lap, his expression shocked.

“What the fuck man?” I said.

He looked at me. “They want to meet with us.”

“What for?”

“They want to sign us.”

“Holy shit.” I didn’t know how else to respond. That was huge. Sub Pop wasn’t a major label, but they were one of the biggest independents. It would be an enormous boost to the band to get a record deal with them. Actually, it would make us legit. We’d be able to tour and make actual music in a real studio. No more basement tracks and awful local gigs, we’d have a label behind us. I was in shock.

“Yeah man, holy fucking shit,” George said.

“What else did they say?”

He shrugged. “Not much. We have a meeting on Wednesday at ten. We’ll go over the contracts and the details then. But he said they’re interested in a two album deal.”

I stood up. I could feel my joy bubbling over. “George!” I yelled.

“I know dude.” He looked like he was about to explode. I started to pace around the apartment, nervous energy flowing out of me. I couldn’t believe it, everything we had done, the struggle and the hard work, was finally starting to pay off.

“We made it,” I said.

“I know man. I know.”

“George!” I said, and then jumped on him. We hugged, laughing, not caring how weird it was, not caring about anything but the incredible news we had just gotten.

Finally, I climbed off him, and started pacing again.

“We have to call the others,” I said.

“Yeah man, I’m on it.”

“And we have to make sure Tom doesn’t fuck this up.”

“Absolutely we do. But I don’t think he will, not something like this.”

“Yeah, you’re probably right. Holy shit man.”

“I know, I know. Let me call the others.” George stood and walked into my bedroom. I kept pacing back and forth, imagining the future. We’d tour the world, become real rock stars with actual fans and records. Our music would be everywhere, on the radio and in record stores. We’d play all the talk shows! I couldn’t sit still let alone calm myself down. It was probably the happiest moment of my life, or at least in the top three.

I pulled out my phone and wrote a text.

11:51am Me: Just heard from the label. We have a meeting on Wednesday.

11:55am Emma: wow, what does that mean? Are you getting signed?

11:56am Me: I don’t know! I don’t know. I think so.

11:57am Emma: Jim! That’s amazing! Congrats!!!!

11:58am Me: I’m in shock honestly.

11:59am Emma: I would be too. I’m so happy for you!

12:00pm Me: Thanks. You’re the first person I’ve told.

12:02pm Emma: hah I’m honored.

I had no clue why she was the first person I told, but I couldn't help myself. All thoughts about the job had suddenly vanished from my mind. The only thing I cared about was the meeting, and what would happen after that. If we really got signed to Sub Pop, my life was about to change in a serious way.

12:03pm Me: Want to meet up on Tuesday?

I didn't know what I was doing, but I suddenly needed to see her. I didn't care if her friends knew, or if anyone knew. I just wanted to see Emma, and maybe celebrate. I didn't care where we went or what we did, as long as I got to do it with her.

12:05pm Emma: okay, sure. What do you want to do?

12:06pm Me: I don't know. How about lunch?

12:08pm Emma: It'll have to be after my class. How about at 2?

12:10pm Me: That's good. Meet me outside the student center?

12:11pm Emma: See you then.

I was beyond excited, almost shaking. I was about to meet up with a student I was seeing on campus. It wasn't like we were about to make out in front of the dean of students or something like that, but it was still a serious move on my part. I figured we could grab lunch from a truck and hangout, which wasn't totally unusual for a professor to do. Lunch wasn't breaking any rules. And besides, I didn't care about the rules at that point. My life was on the verge of tipping over into something different and great.

And all I kept thinking was how badly I wanted to share that with Emma.

Chapter Ten: Emma

I walked to my Tuesday morning class, head down. I hadn't heard much from Jim since Sunday morning, and I figured he was busy with his band, preparing for their big meeting. I had been wildly swinging between wanting to text him to make sure we were still on to meet, and wanting to ditch out on him entirely. I had been spending way too much time analyzing our conversations with Lane, and not enough time studying.

The day was drab and rainy, so I wore my green raincoat and boots. I was nervous about class and about meeting Jim after, and my stomach was in knots. I kept thinking about the night in the hidden garden, kissing him softly, the way his hands felt on my hips, the press of his hard cock against me, and the problems that were keeping us apart. I couldn't let myself slip up just because of some boy. I had to admit to myself that part of the excitement was the forbidden aspect of it, although that was really more of an added bonus than anything else.

I made my way through the crowded, between-class hallways, found my room, and took my usual seat toward the front. I wasn't the type to speak up every day, but I did like to be close enough that I wasn't tempted to be distracted by anything. I kept thinking about Jim and our impending meeting, and more or less glossed over the professor's entire lecture. It wasn't an important class, but I usually took much better notes. I looked at my notebook and realized it was mostly full of doodles.

As the lecture finished, the professor looked out over the class and pulled some papers from his bag.

“Okay class. Good job today,” he said, and everyone started to pack up. “Before you leave, I have your tests from last week graded.”

He went around the room, passing out the papers. There were maybe twenty of us total in the American Civics class, and he passed them out quickly. Finally, he put mine down on my desk. My heart was pounding as I turned it over.

I stared at the paper while the class stood up and packed their bags. They chatted quietly, but their usually friendly-sounding hum felt like bees in my ears. I couldn't believe my grade: a C-, the worst grade I'd gotten since coming to college. I looked through the papers and couldn't believe all the stupid errors I made. I had studied hard for that test, and when the time came I didn't perform. Shock and terror ran through my skin. Finally, I packed my things, and made my way out of the room and into the crowded hallways.

The world moved around me in a daze. I knew I had to meet Jim, but he was suddenly the furthest thing from my mind. I couldn't remember the last time I got below a B-. It was probably in high school math, but even then I had managed to pull off a B average in the end. I couldn't believe I had gotten a C- on an easy Civics test that I had studied for. I could already see the disappointment and anger in my parents' eyes, although I wasn't going to tell them anything. They were forever bugging me about my grades, and I'd have to hide the test from them. I couldn't even imagine what would happen if I ended up with anything below a B+ in that class; they'd probably freak and threaten to pull me out of school. I knew I could take out loans or something to make it work without them, but they had been a huge support system for me financially, and I wasn't ready to break off completely on my own.

I moved back outside, into the rainy day. I trudged along, lost in thought, over toward the Student Center where I promised I'd meet Jim. It took me a second, with the crowd and the rain, but I spotted him standing nearby, holding a big black umbrella. He waved at me, and I went over to him.

"Hey Emma," he said, grinning.

I managed to smile back. "Hey there yourself. How's it going?"

"Pretty good. How about you?"

"I'm okay I guess. What are we doing today?"

"Let's go grab some lunch at the Noshery."

I nodded. "Lead the way."

He stepped closer to me so that I was under his umbrella. "No need for you to get wet."

"That's just an excuse to get close to me," I said.

"Don't pretend like you mind."

I smiled and he started walking. I kept pace with him, but my mind was somewhere else. I was thinking about what my parents would say about my grade if I showed them, the disappointment in their eyes, and the frustration I felt at being so helpless. I wanted to succeed in everything, but a bad test grade was not the way to do it. I liked being so near to Jim, but I also was afraid that he had distracted me from the test. I knew that was crazy, since I had been studying before I had even met him, but I couldn't help but somehow link Jim with my bad performance. It was exactly what I had feared: a new person in my life was keeping me from achieving what I needed.

We crossed Broad Street in the splashing rain, stepping around puddles. Jim said something, but I missed it. He looked down at me, and then said it again.

“Have you ever been here?”

“Oh, sorry. Yeah, I’ve been here a few times.”

“Good, I like this place.”

“Yeah, it’s pretty good.”

I lapsed into silence, and he seemed to sense that there was no use in pushing me further. I felt bad, but I couldn’t shake the funk of my bad grade. It was like a shroud had fallen over me. I shifted from my normal self into this bad mood, a walking cloud of anger and frustration. We walked toward a small strip mall, a block-long chain of stores with a movie theater on top, and entered one of the smaller shops. The Noshery was a nicer sandwich place that did delicious specialties. I was a big fan of the Noshery, but for some reason it felt cluttered and smaller than usual.

Jim closed his umbrella and shook some of the excess water off outside.

“After you,” he said, nodding to the counter. I approached, suddenly pulled out of my self-introspection. I ordered a spinach, turkey, brie, and pesto Panini, and Jim ordered a spicy fried eggplant sub. As I gathered our food, Jim beat me to the cashier and paid for everything.

“You really didn’t have to do that,” I said to him as we carried our trays to an empty table. The place was pretty small, and we were lucky that nobody else was there. I guessed that the big lunch rush had already ended.

“I know, but I wanted to.”

“Fine, I’ll let you this one time. Since you’ll be rich soon.”

He laughed and took a bite of his food. I didn't feel hungry, but I managed to nibble at the corners anyway. Whenever something bad happened in my life, I always lost my appetite. Some people dealt with stress by eating, but I dealt with stress by buckling down and working harder. Lane liked to say that I fought stress with more stress, and that I'd eventually die of a heart attack if I didn't calm down. She was probably right, but an obsessive work ethic had been drilled into me by my parents from a very young age. Failure was not tolerated in my household.

"So what's on your mind?" Jim said, breaking me out of my reverie.

"Nothing, sorry," I said.

He shook his head. "It's totally cool, you don't have to be sorry. I was just wondering if there's something you want to talk about."

"It's stupid school stuff."

"Your stuff isn't stupid. If talking would make you feel better, I'll listen."

I looked at him for a second, suddenly seeing him for the first time that day. He was handsome, and he looked as if he had grown up since I had first seen him. His faded, well-fitting jeans looked more mature, and his high leather boots more worn. He smiled at me, and I felt butterflies in my stomach, like a cliché, love-struck teenager. I couldn't help myself, though; despite my terrible mood, Jim seemed to have a knack for drawing me out.

"Well," I said slowly. "I got a bad grade on a test."

He nodded seriously. "How bad?"

"I got a C- on a Civics exam."

"American Civics? That really sucks, I'm sorry."

“The frustrating part is, I actually studied. And it’s not even a difficult class. I guess for whatever reason, the material just didn’t stick, or I didn’t study the right stuff. I made a bunch of stupid mistakes.”

“How are you doing otherwise?”

I shrugged. “I’ve gotten A’s and B’s on everything else, so I can’t imagine this will hurt my average too much.”

“It’s still frustrating though.”

“Exactly, it’s the principle of the thing. I keep picturing what my parents would say.” I looked out the window at the rainy day, and got a flash of my father’s disappointed smile, and my mother’s blank stare.

“What would they say?”

“They’d be disappointed, I guess. Failure is not allowed at home.”

Jim frowned. “That seems pretty intense.”

“Yeah, it is. My parents push my siblings and me pretty hard, because they were pushed when they were younger. My dad says it’s the best gift his parents ever gave him.”

“Sounds like a really difficult standard.”

“It really can be sometimes. I wish they’d relax, but I know they mean well.”

“Do you have to tell them?” he asked. I took a bite of my sandwich, and he followed suit. We chewed for a second in silence, and I could feel my appetite starting to return.

“No, I don’t, and I’m not going to. It’s hard to explain, I guess.”

He nodded. “It’s hard for people to understand other family dynamics.”

“Yeah, that’s absolutely true. And mine happens to be a little weirder and more fucked up than usual.”

He smiled and laughed a little. It made me feel good, to make him laugh, and warmth spread through my chest.

“Yeah that might be true, but you seem pretty great despite it.”

I smiled, and we went back to eating again. This time, the silence didn’t feel heavy or uncomfortable, but a natural side effect of two people chewing. We chatted more about our families, and I told him about my siblings. My oldest brother was a young partner of a large law firm in New York, and my parents could not have been prouder. My older sister taught at an expensive private school for rich kids up in Vermont, and was a published fiction writer. In a lot of ways, I was the last hope for another doctor in the family, and I felt a lot of pressure to follow that up. Jim listened quietly, and asked questions that showed genuine interest. I was surprised at how good of a listener he was, and I felt like he really understood what I was trying to say.

He told me about his family, and about his life growing up. He had been drifting for a long time, and it was only lately that he felt like he really found purpose. Teaching was a great thing for him, and he loved every minute of it. Suddenly though, the band was maybe about to take off, and he was torn about what to pursue. We finished our meals, cleaned off our table, and stepped back out into the rain.

“Do you really need to choose?” I asked, continuing our conversation.

“I’m not sure, honestly. If I’m going to tour and devote a lot of time to the record, I should probably quit and do it full time. Then again, being a teacher does give me a lot of stability.”

I nodded. “Yeah, I mean it seems like you could do both. Or maybe come back to teaching later on when the album is out and your tour is over.”

We walked aimlessly, angling back toward campus. I had another class in an hour, and Jim had to get back home to grade some papers, but neither of us wanted to leave. The rain had let up, and the city smelled clean. The water had washed away the dirt, and it felt quiet and pure.

“So just grading for the rest of the day?” I asked.

“I’m meeting with the guys tonight to talk about tomorrow’s meeting.”

We stood by a recessed park, set down a few steps, where people liked to skate. We watched a guy jump up and grind a rail, but fell on his butt when trying to land it.

“You’re going to do great,” I said.

“I hope so. I’m pretty nervous.”

“They want you. You don’t need to be nervous.”

“That’s true, they did approach us.”

I reached out and took his hand, and he looked at me. I squeezed, and he squeezed back. I wanted to kiss him badly, to feel his soft lips against mine, but I knew I couldn’t, at least not on campus.

“Careful there,” he said softly.

I stepped closer. “I know I can’t kiss you right now.”

He looked at me for half a second, and then leaned in and pressed his lips against mine. We kissed, his mouth warm and soft around mine, and I felt his hand tighten in mine. I was hungry for him, I realized, and wanted only for him to take me back to my apartment, strip my clothes from my body, and kiss every inch of my skin. I wanted to

feel him against me, naked and sweating, our bodies moving in time. As we broke off our kiss, I sucked in a deep breath to help rid my mind of distracting thoughts.

“What if someone saw that?” I asked playfully.

“We’ll tell them it’s a new teaching method,” he said, grinning.

“You’re a wonderful professor.”

“That’s what all the ladies tell me.”

I gave him a fake angry look and dropped his hand.

“Okay, I have to get going. Good luck tomorrow. Let me know how it goes.”

He nodded. “I’ll text you.”

“See you.” I waved and then started walking in the direction of my class. I thought I felt his gaze linger as I turned a corner. The bad grade was suddenly as far away as possible, pushed back into my memory, and all I could think about was kissing Jim, and maybe getting in trouble for it.

Chapter Eleven: Jim

Sub Pop had a studio and offices on Market Street in Old City. There was a famous record store around the corner, so we decided to meet there before going in. I stood outside the building in my professor outfit, since I wasn't sure what else I should wear to a meeting with a record label. It was nine in the morning, an hour before we had to be at the office, and I was the first one there.

Across the street, a low brick walkway separated the sidewalk from a rolling expanse of grass and benches. I watched men and women in business suits hustle by, some of them obviously late for their high-powered jobs. I was terrified about the meeting and about what it all meant. Making a living as a musician wasn't an easy life, even with the backing of a decent studio. There were still long hours and the uncertainty of being a performer. We would be at the mercy of forces outside of our control, and that thought scared me.

But above all, I was relieved. The thing I had been working for most of my life, success in the music industry, was so close I could feel it. I didn't want to be the kind of person who went to a job every day. The routine would have been nice, but sometimes I thrived on the chaos of touring and of performing. Standing outside of that old music shop, where people still bought actual vinyl records, I knew I was making the right choice.

"Yo Jim," George said, waving. He approached from down the block, and was wearing his usual jeans and T-shirt.

"Yo George. Got dressed up I see."

“It’s Sub Pop, man. They’re not a big label like Sony or something.”

I shrugged. “Yeah, I mean, I guess I didn’t exactly go all out.”

He clapped me on the shoulder. “Yeah man, just your usual stuffy professor look. It’s your thing.”

“What can I say, the undergrad ladies love it.”

“Speaking of which, how’s yours?”

“My what?” I said, looking puzzled.

“Your undergrad lady, idiot.” George shoved his hands in his pockets.

“Oh, Emma. Man, don’t call her my ‘undergrad lady,’ that’s just too weird.”

He laughed. “You started it. Anyway, how’s it going?”

I looked out across the street again and pictured Emma’s expression on that rainy day. She had been very brooding, and I was originally worried that it was my fault. I thought the whole professor thing, and my wanting to take it slow, was putting her off. I was relieved to learn she had just gotten a bad grade on a test, but it was also an odd reminder of her status as a student.

“Complicated, mostly.”

“Yeah, it’s always like that. I’m hoping this meeting will simplify things.”

I looked at him sideways. “How’s that?”

“Well, if they sign us, you can quit teaching.”

I nodded. “I thought about that.”

“Yeah, and where are you leaning?”

“I honestly don’t know, man. I feel like if I left teaching, it would mostly be because I could see Emma for real. But that’s a little crazy, right?”

“Yep, that is a little crazy.”

I laughed. “That’s not the answer I wanted.”

“I know, but it’s true.”

“So you think I should stay a professor?”

“Hell no man, you should absolutely quit. If you were walking away from this job with nothing else, just to be with Emma, I’d tell you not to. But it isn’t just for her, is it? You’re taking a risk on your music. Otherwise, you’d quit teaching, record deal or no record deal.”

“Yeah, you’re right.” And I realized that he was. Whether or not I quit, my decision was going to be for me.

“She’s a bonus, though,” George said, grinning.

“She’s definitely a bonus.” For a second, I pictured her full lips and bright smile.

“What’s up, fuckers?” George and I both looked over and saw Tom coming toward us, a big smile plastered on his face.

“Hey Tom, didn’t expect you to be early,” I said.

Tom stopped in front of us, still grinning. We all shook hands.

“Look guys,” Tom started, his face serious, but George interrupted.

“Save it, man. We know.”

Tom shook his head. “Let me say it. I’m sorry I’ve been such a fucking asshole lately. No more being late. No more being too drunk to perform.”

“Tell your girlfriends that last bit,” I said.

“Really guys, I’m sorry. I wasn’t taking this seriously enough, but no more of that.”

“We know. It’s all good,” George said.

Before Tom could get more sentimental, Andy strolled up. We went through our handshakes and greetings and nervous jokes again, plus more apologies from Tom. We stood outside of the record store in a loose circle. Nobody wore a suit, which was good. I felt like we were in high school again, just four nervous teenage friends waiting to get up in front of a tiny crowd in some crappy dive bar.

I looked at them one at a time, the guys that I had known for most of my life, and reflected quietly on our career together. We had come from George’s basement, and slowly moved out into the wider world. They were my best and closest friends, the people who knew me better than anyone else. I couldn’t have chosen a better group of guys, despite all of our differences in the past.

We stood around, chatting about nothing, killing time before we had to go into the office. Finally, after what felt like years, the clock struck nine thirty, and we made our way over, each nervous in our own way.

Three hours later, after the meeting, we spilled back out onto the street. My head felt dizzy and light, packed full with contract clauses and addendums. At first, it was intimidating as we sat around a large conference table with product managers and lawyers. They were professionals, serious people, and we fell into negotiations. Quickly, though, we realized they wanted to sign us, and were offering a pretty damn good deal. They walked us through it step by step, and didn’t rush us into signing. Andy had a pretty

good head on him for business, and asked plenty of questions. Finally, we did what we had always wanted to do: we signed with a real record label.

After the paperwork was finished, they gave us a tour of the Philly studio. We went into the sound booth, met some of the engineers, and walked the historic hallways. Sub Pop had been around for a while, and had branched out into Philadelphia in the last few years. We were really lucky they decided to enter into Philly; without a label like them, I wasn't sure we'd ever get signed. As it was, they were liberal in their policies and gave their artists a lot of freedom. I didn't feel like we were selling out. Far from it, we were going with an indie brand, even if it was a big indie. They had an amazing reputation in the industry.

I felt overwhelmed standing in the actual studio. We played a few bars on the piano and house guitars, screwing around, giddy with excitement. I felt like a kid again, discovering music for the very first time. It was like we had never played together before, and we soon found ourselves jamming. Nobody asked us to stop; far from it, the engineers actually recorded some of the stuff we played. After an hour of that, we eventually had to leave since another artist had time scheduled, but it was an incredible experience playing in an actual music studio. The closest I had ever come was an old four-track recorder in our garage.

After jamming, we spoke more with our producer. We all liked him instantly, and he had really good success with artists before us. He said work on the new album would start in a month. We had that long to put together a rough sketch for its shape and sound, but nobody was thinking about that just yet. All we wanted to do was celebrate, and Tom

was dead set on buying. Once we were done meeting with the producer and going over what's next, we went into the elevators, and left.

As we walked down Market, elated and flying high, all I could think about was calling Emma and sharing the good news with her. I knew it was crazy, but she was the only thing I could see, and wanted to see. I pulled out my phone and wrote her a text.

1:13pm Me: hey just left the meeting, guess who is a Sub Pop artist?

1:15pm Emma: holy shit!!! Congrats!!!! That's really amazing

1:16pm Me: Thanks, we're beyond excited. I seriously can't believe it. I really can't. it's a dream come true.

1:17pm Emma: I'm really happy for you

1:18pm Me: Can I see you?

1:20pm Emma: When?

1:21pm Me: I don't know, today. Now. As soon as possible.

1:21pm Emma: Come over in an hour. I'll skip my next class.

1:22pm Me: I'll see you in an hour.

I could hardly stop grinning as the boys piled into a bar. I followed them, since I had time to kill, but I wasn't staying long. I told George right away that I planned on leaving, and he seemed cool with it. Tom was a bit harder to convince, but he came around eventually. They were happy to see me moving on, getting myself back out there, and if it meant skipping some of the celebration then they would have to survive. I knew we had a long road ahead of us, but we could do anything we wanted to in that moment.

Finally, after a celebratory shot, I said goodbye, left the bar, and found my bike. I rode slowly over to Emma's, letting the comfort of pedaling clear my head. I breathed

deep the city air, ecstatic and nervous all at once. I took the long way, still killing time, and enjoyed the sounds of the city. I couldn't believe my luck, and my future was both uncertain and exciting. I still wasn't sure what I wanted to do about my teaching position, but it didn't bother me anymore. I wasn't trapped, and didn't necessarily need to stay. I wanted to stay, but I had other options.

I took a right onto Broad Street and rode along with traffic. My stomach tied itself into knots thinking about seeing Emma's apartment for the first time, and about what I'd do when I saw her. Part of me wanted to quit my job immediately and take her out around campus, but I knew that wasn't necessary. I had to finish out my semester first either way. I glided left onto Cecile B. Moore Street and pedaled hard passed the athletic center toward the track and the soccer fields. I kept thinking about her body, her soft curves and her perfect lips.

Finally, I pulled out front of her apartment. I climbed off my bike and locked it to a nearby street sign. I realized I was more nervous to knock on her door than I was in a meeting that would determine my future. The executives and the lawyers were intimidating, but they were nothing compared to her. Shaking my head at the absurdity of everything, I climbed the steps, and rang her doorbell.

I didn't have to wait long. She pulled the door open, and I felt my breath catch. She was wearing short jean shorts, her glasses, and a simple black T-shirt, and she looked perfect. I took a step toward her, and before she could say anything, I took her face in my hands and kissed her lips hard. I felt her mouth open against mine, and her soft tongue and lips, and savored her taste and her touch. Desire flooded through me, and I realized that this was the best part of my day.

Chapter Twelve: Emma

Jim took my face in his hands and kissed me hard and deep. I realized how hungry I was for him, and wrapped my arms around his strong shoulders. I drank in every second of his lips and mouth, embracing his shoulders and returning his kiss. Soon, we broke off, and I grinned up at him like a moron. I felt the heat grow in my core and my breath came heavy.

“Come on in, rock star,” I said.

He laughed. “Not quite yet,” he said as he followed me in. We went up a flight of stairs and I let us into my apartment.

I led him inside and gave him the short tour.

“Kitchen and living room,” I said, pointing to my right then to my left.

“Very nice, clean too.”

I laughed. “Are you judging my apartment?”

“I absolutely am, yes.” He gave me a devilish grin.

“Don’t be a dick,” I replied, and he laughed.

I walked back down the hall. “This is Lane’s room, this is the bathroom, and this is my room.” I pushed the door open and he followed me in. We stood for a second, and he glanced around the space. Small bed, small desk, small television, all crammed into a tiny room. It was a pretty average apartment. I realized he wasn’t snooping through my things like I expected him to, but was staring at me instead.

“You’re incredible,” he said quietly, and took a step closer. My breath caught in my throat. He wrapped his arms around my waist, cupping my ass, and kissed my lips hard.

It was the deepest kiss yet, and I could sense something in the way his hands roamed along my body, cupping a breast over my thin T-shirt. I pressed my hips against his, starving for his kiss and his body. After a few moments of passionate kissing, he pushed me gently toward the bed, and I sat down on its edge. There was something hard and needy in his gaze as he ran his eyes up along my body, from my tan legs to my lips.

“What happened to taking it slowly?” I asked as he knelt down in front of me. My lips parted and began to tremble.

“Fuck slow,” he said, and pulled my shorts off. I let out a small gasp and could feel the wetness between my legs grow.

“Okay, fuck slow,” I said as his lips began to kiss my spot over my underwear. I leaned back on my elbows and let out a small moan. After a second of teasing, he slid my black panties down my legs and gently pressed his thumb against my swollen clit. I let out a gasp and looked at him as he grinned back.

“I’ve been wanting this so badly,” he said.

“Me too,” I answered.

He dipped his lips toward my cleft and ran his tongue along my soaking spot. I let out a low moan again, and I felt him spread my legs further. His tongue found my clit, licking and sucking gently, alternating pressure and softness. I felt the pleasure build and roll along my stomach and chest. His tongue moved down my length and thrust inside,

and I writhed against the soft moist pressure, letting out small moans. He raised a hand, running his fingers gently along my skin, and cupped my breast.

“Fuck, you’re good at that,” I let slip as he pulled away. I was breathless and dizzy from the way he had expertly worked my spot.

He grinned in response then moved up on the bed. I felt his warm body against mine as he kissed me, and the hard shaft of his cock pressed against my thigh. I reached down and grasped it through his jeans, gently but firmly stroking it up and down. After a second of kissing, he pulled away. He shifted to the side then pulled my shirt off, exposing a black lacy bra. His gaze lingered on my breasts as he came forward again, kissing my chest and neck, and he undid my bra. I slid it off as he kissed a nipple, gently biting and licking it. I let a small groan. Holy shit, my legs were practically quaking.

“You’re beautiful,” he whispered. I leaned forward and pulled his shirt off. He was more defined than I had expected, lean but strong, his muscles standing out firm on his chest and arms. I pushed him back, and then started to unbuckle his belt.

I kissed him as I undid the fly to his jeans, and then pulled away to slide them off his body. He was wearing grey boxer briefs, and his surprisingly large, thick cock strained against the thin cotton. I moved back up, supporting myself with my left arm, and kissed him again as his hands found my soaking spot, his fingers confidently ranging along my mound, finding my swollen clit, and rubbing gently. I shuddered with pleasure.

“We should have done this sooner,” I said quietly.

His eyes smoldered at me in return. I pulled away and slid his briefs off, and marveled at his thick, rock hard cock. I reached out and grasped it gently, and he let out a

small grunt. I stroked it slowly then leaned forward and wrapped my lips around his tip. I sucked hard and slid his shaft into my mouth, letting my saliva soak his skin.

“Fuck that’s good,” he grunted at me. I moved up and down slowly, letting my hand trail after my lips. He groaned his pleasure and grabbed the sheets. I worked his tip, then licked him root to top. I pulled his cock from my mouth, trailing a thin line of saliva, and looked him in the eye. I slowly stroked his cock and he ran his eyes along my bare chest and lips, his look filled with desire. His cock was incredibly hard in my hand, thick and erect.

“I want you to fuck me,” I said. He grinned slightly then rolled to the edge of the bed as I settled back. I heard him find a condom in his jeans, pulling it out of his pocket impatiently, rip it open, roll it on, and then he was back. I could feel myself high on anticipation, soaking wet and aching with a need for him. My pulse pounded in my chest.

“You carry those often?” I asked him.

“Always be prepared,” he said.

I felt him press between me as I wrapped my legs around his back, ruining my comeback. There was nothing, then I felt him press inside me, his thick, hard dick filling every inch of me. I let out a small gasp as the slight pain of his first thrust mingled with the pleasure of his touch. His lips brushed against my jaw and ear and he slowly moved inside me, pressing deep into my core.

“God, you’re incredible,” he grunted into my ear as he slowly worked up momentum. I was soaking wet and groaning, and my fingers gripped into his strong back as he thrust into me deeper with every motion. His hips ground against mine and I responded, pleasure rolling up my chest and back.

Holy shit. He was huge, but perfect, and he clearly knew what he was doing as he slowly built up his thrusts. He filled my aching spot, every possible inch of me, and ground inside, taking my body. He reached back with one hand and grabbed my hip, angling my cleft upwards, and I felt his cock hit my spot. My eyes practically rolled into the back of my head as I groaned, unable to keep quiet or to control myself. He moved quicker, pressing his hips against mine, and thrusting deep and hard inside of me. I needed him, and took everything he gave, feeling the sweat begin to roll down his chest.

He slowed down his thrusts then pulled back, rolling back onto his knees. I let out a small gasp of frustration, but quickly he grabbed my hips and rolled me onto my stomach. I pulled my knees up, my hips and ass up in the air, and buried my face in a pillow as he slipped into me from behind. Slowly at first, but faster and strong, he thrust into me, his hands firm on my hips. I loved it, loved his strength and the way he filled me, and I moaned loudly into the pillows. Soon, he reached one hand around my hips, and found my soaked clit.

I bucked my hips back against him, greedy for every inch of his huge shaft, while his right hand worked my clit. I felt the pleasure building and mounting, driving into my core and stomach. He grunted his pleasure, panting, and we were both sweating in my small hot room. Nothing else mattered in that moment, and the only thing I needed was his strong hands and his hard cock inside of me, as I felt my climax start to build.

I moved my hips harder, and he increased his strength to match mine. His fingers stayed on my clit, softly letting my momentum dictate the force of his touch, and I slowly built up my movements. Finally, I let out a low, long moan as the climax rolled over me, every inch of my body tensing. My legs began to shake uncontrollably as the pleasure

began to white out the world around me, deep and heavy and incredible, wave after wave of satisfying, world-breaking pleasure moving up my hips and spine. My back arched and my fingers dug into the sheets around me as he continued to fill my spot.

Slowly, the orgasm subsided, and I was left panting into the pillows.

“Fuck Emma,” he said, still moving inside me. I groaned and rolled my head to the side, breathing deep. “Fuck I want to come,” he grunted, moving his hips faster.

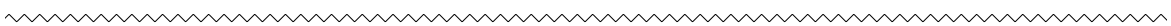
“Come for me,” I whispered, and moved my hips to match him. I felt his hands grip my hips harder, his huge cock thrusting into me, and I needed it, everything he had to give me. I felt all of the pressures of my life slip away until there was nothing but his hard body inside me, and his strong arms and hands on my skin. There was nothing but his warmth and his desire. Soon, I felt him stiffen and groan, as he thrust deep into me. I matched him, wanting to work his cock as best I could.

“Come for me,” I said again, and he grunted as his body shuddered its climax. Slowly he stopped then there was an absence of him where once I was full. I collapsed onto my side, and he collapsed behind me, his arms wrapped around my body. We lay there quietly, breathing deep.

“That was fucking beautiful,” he said.

I laughed. “I’m glad you enjoyed it.”

We quietly breathed against each other, lost in the post glow of our orgasms.



We dressed slowly, still enjoying each other’s half-naked bodies. I loved the way he looked at me, his eyes both hungry and soft.

“So, I guess the whole student thing isn’t an issue anymore,” I said.

He shrugged, and looked out the window. “I’m not sure, honestly. I could definitely quit and focus on the music, but I love teaching.”

“I get that. The teaching is more stable.”

“Yeah, that’s exactly it. It’s stable, I know it’ll be there. Music is a huge risk.”

“But isn’t it better now that you have a label?”

He nodded, turning back to me. “Yeah, that’s definitely true.”

“And what have you always pictured yourself doing, making music or teaching it?”

“Making music, definitely.”

“And Sub Pop is a really good label to get signed to.”

He laughed. “I see where you’re going with this.”

“Look, I’m not trying to pressure you or anything. I’ve always lived my life doing the right thing, doing what my parents want me to do, doing what’s expected of me. I’ve maybe ignored other opportunities because of it. But it’s never too late.”

“So you think I should quit teaching.”

“I’m not going to say that.” I moved closer and kissed his shoulder. “It’d maybe be selfish of me to say you should quit teaching. Plus, it’s sexy, fucking the professor.”

He grinned. “You like being a bad student, don’t you?”

I smacked his arm, but inwardly felt a thrill. “Anyway, do what you think is right.”

He nodded again and sighed. “I know. I’ve just never had to make a choice like this before.”

“What about the other guys in your band?”

“George will probably quit his job. Andy probably won’t, at least not at first. And Tom doesn’t really work full time anyway, so he’s ready to put everything into this.”

There was a short pause in the conversation as we got fully dressed. I caught him peeking at me as I pulled my jeans on, and gave him a look. He grinned in return.

“How are you doing, by the way?” he asked.

“I’m fine now. I got over it, I guess.”

“Good, I’m glad. You’re incredible. You’re going to be fine.”

I smiled. “Thanks. That means a lot.”

He leaned forward again and kissed me. I reached up and ran my fingers through his hair, savoring his taste and his lips. He pulled away, smiling huge.

“I want to keep doing that,” he said.

“I want that too.”

He wrapped his arms around me, and I felt safe, comfortable, and needed. My worries and stress didn’t return for the rest of the day.

Chapter Thirteen: Jim

I was nervous, but I knew it was the right decision. I walked up the stairs, almost in a daze, the previous day's events running through my mind. First, I signed with a serious, incredible record label with a band composed of my closest friends. It was a dream come true, something I had wanted ever since I was a kid. When I was fourteen, I started playing seriously, and never looked back. Writing songs and playing came naturally to me throughout my life, and although it took me awhile to achieve success, I never let myself give up completely. There were always frustrations and setbacks, but I persevered.

Then there was Emma. Her body was incredible, she was funny and smart and dedicated. Being with her was something I hadn't seriously considered. After Amy broke my heart, I thought I would never fall for another girl. But I felt myself spinning whenever I thought about Emma, and the way she made me laugh. We spent all of Wednesday in and out of bed, celebrating my success, but also celebrating each other. It was like a huge weight had lifted off my back, and we were finally together.

I pushed open the stairwell door and walked down a carpeted hallway. Halfway toward the end, I knocked on a big wooden door, and then pushed it open.

"Can I help you?" said a woman sitting at a desk. She was probably mid-fifties, hair in a tight, greying bun, and wore glasses.

"Hi, I'm Jim Sleeter, I'm here to see Professor Mason."

"Oh hi Jim, go right on in. He's expecting you." She smiled at me.

"Thanks," I said then opened the door to her right.

Inside, Professor Mason, head of the music department and my dad's old friend, sat at a huge wooden desk. The walls were covered in books, and there were three old guitars in the corner.

"Jim! How are things?" he said, smiling at me.

"Hi Mr. Mason. Things are pretty good, how are you?"

"Please, call me Fred." I shut the door behind me then took a seat at a chair in front of him.

"Okay, Fred." I felt a little weird using his name.

"What can I do for you?"

"Well, I have good and bad news."

He laughed. "Start with the good news then."

"My band was signed to a pretty serious label, Sub Pop."

"Hey, congratulations! That's fantastic. What's the deal?"

"Two albums, we start on the first in a month."

"That's incredible Jim. Great news."

"Which brings me to the bad news."

"You can't work at Temple anymore."

I laughed and nodded. "I'm sorry, Fred. This is a huge opportunity, and I have to pursue it."

He stood and walked around his desk, and sat in the chair next to me. "Jim, of course you do. I wouldn't let you stay even if you wanted to now."

Relief flooded over me. This man had taken a chance on me, given me a job when he didn't need to in a competitive field that I wasn't exactly qualified for, at least on paper. I felt like I was letting him down.

"Thank you so much for taking a shot on me, I really appreciate it."

He nodded. "Listen, you're a smart kid, and talented. You're going to be successful. I wasn't taking a chance on you, I was just giving a qualified individual a teaching job. That's it."

"I appreciate you saying that, really."

He clapped me on the shoulder, smiling. "Good luck Jim. I'm sure I'm going to hear you on the radio very soon."

"I hope so."

He stood and I followed. We shook hands.

"If you ever want to come back, really, don't hesitate to call me."

"Thanks Fred."

I waved as I left, glowing. I had expected that to go completely different, but it was perfect. He wasn't upset at all; if anything, he was excited for me. I knew he had to fill my position, or at least get someone to cover my next semester's classes, but he clearly didn't mind. Somebody would do it; there were always eager, smart people trying to teach college. But I was free, and I was ready to pursue my dream.

I walked down the stairs, my mind racing. I imagined everything that was to come, the hard work and the dedication. I had some savings, and we were getting a small advance on the first album, so I had enough to live on. Everything was going to work out fine for me. Best of all, I had Emma, and I didn't have to stress about the inappropriate

teacher-student relationship. We were free to be whatever we wanted to be. Part of me worried that the draw of the illicit relationship would wear off and she'd find someone new, but whatever was meant to happen would happen.

I pushed open the door and went out into a beautiful, sunny day. The campus was crawling with students enjoying the sunshine, young kids laying out on the grass, milling around with their friends, eating lunch truck food and throwing footballs. I pulled out my phone and texted Emma.

1:14pm Me: I am officially no longer a professor

1:17pm Emma: Congrats! You're a full time musician now.

1:18pm Emma: but I guess I'm not interested anymore if we're no longer in a forbidden affair.

1:18pm Me: that's okay I was only in it for your body

1:19pm Emma: Shut up and come over here.

I grinned stupidly at my phone as I slid it back into my pocket. I unlocked my bike from the black iron fence, strapped on my helmet, and hopped on. I rode into traffic, glided out toward Emma and my future, reveling in the uncertainty. Anything could happen, and I couldn't wait to find out.

Epilogue: Emma

I walked out into the day with a smile on my face for the first time since I started college. I wondered what Jim was up to. He had been working on a new song with George and Tom, and they hadn't left the studio all day.

It was the first day of the second semester and everything had changed. I looked at the crowds of people and imagined how many of them felt the same way that I did.

Finally, after agonizing about it endlessly, after long late night discussions with Jim and Lane, I changed my major from pre-med to criminology. I had always been good with statistics, and I felt that I could make a real difference in Philadelphia. Racial segregation and high levels of murder and crime had blighted the community for a long time. Living at Temple only underscored how dangerous Philadelphia had become. I wanted to get involved with my community and give back to the city that had helped me so much.

My parents were none too pleased. Thinking back to that conversation always made me cringe. My dad yelled and my mom said I was disappointing, but I stood strong and refused to budge. They eventually said they wouldn't pay for my school, which meant I would have to start looking into loans. They softened on that position, though, and agreed to pay for my tuition if I paid for my living expenses. That was more than I had hoped for.

I picked up extra library shifts and got a job working as a waitress at a sports bar on the weekends. That paid enough to keep me in my apartment and fed, although it didn't leave much room for anything else. It was a lot of work figuring out how to

support myself, but I was finally living the way I wanted to, and not the way I was expected to. Everything I did was my choice.

Jim had been a huge help in everything. He supported my decision from day one and was always there to listen when I needed it. At first, when I had trouble making extra money, he showed up with bags of groceries. I managed to pay back his kindness in ways I definitely wouldn't want to tell my parents about.

Lane was amazing, too. We still lived in the same apartment together, and she was totally cool with how often Jim stayed over. It was beginning to feel like one little happy family, and I had never felt freer in my entire life. Dillon stopped by as often as he wanted, although ever since he got a boyfriend that was less and less.

I hopped onto my bike and rode toward my apartment. I was exhausted, and a little terrified, but I was also elated. I wanted nothing more than to lie down on my couch and sleep until the next morning. I quickly crossed over Broad and parked in front of my building, locking my bike to a stop sign. I climbed the stoop, eyelids heavy, unlocked the door, and went inside. I trudged up the stairs, unlocked my apartment door, and pushed it open.

I stopped short, staring at what I saw inside. Candles were everywhere, all different shapes and sizes, and they filled the room with a soft orange glow. The kitchen table was covered in a white tablecloth, two plates, and a flower centerpiece. Jim stood by the stove, stirring a pot, and he was wearing an old apron.

He turned and grinned at me as I enter. "Hey honey," he said.

"What's all this?"

“Congratulations on your first day of school. I thought you’d like a nice home cooked meal.”

“Where’s Lane?”

“She made herself scarce. I had to bribe her with leftovers.”

I laughed. “Wow, I’m impressed.” I took off my stuff and dropped my bag by the door. I went to him and wrapped my arms around his shoulders and kissed him deeply. The food smelled amazing, and his lips were soft. I was briefly overwhelmed by my desire for his body, and for his cooking.

“I make a great housewife,” he said after we pulled away.

“Sexy one, too.”

“I know,” he said, grinning.

I moved away and sat down at the table as he turned back toward the stove.

“How’s the song going?” I asked.

“It’s good, we’re pretty much finished. I have to be back tomorrow morning.”

“Sounds good. Tell the boys I said hi.”

He took his apron off then brought over a pan. He served me a generous portion of pasta with clams and red sauce. I had no clue where he got all the ingredients, but it smelled amazing and I loved clams. He finished serving himself, put the pan back on the stove then sat down across from me.

I reached my hand across the table and he took it, smiling.

“I love you,” I said.

“I love you too, Emma.”

I laughed then looked at my plate. “But I think I love these clams more.”

“You better.”

I let go of his hand, picked up my utensils, and began to dig in.

Thank You

Thanks so much for reading TAUGHT. I'm so glad you let me share this story with you.

Please consider leaving me a review if possible, it's the best way you can support your favorite artists.

Consider signing up for my mailing list. I'll very occasionally send you updates on new releases, promotions, and free book giveaways. I promise never to send you spam!

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Vol. 3 of City's Secrets: FILMED is coming soon!