

We, The Nighthawks  
Chapter Two

The return to school could have been worse. For Conner, that is. For the other two in the car, it went swimmingly. Angelica took advantage of the remaining minutes of her Christmas present – she insisted winter break wasn't over until the first bell rang – and Conner did his best not to glance in the back seat.

As for the editor-in-chief, he was relieved that fainting spell seemed to have been forgotten over the two-week vacation. Sure, Nick Neuhauser made a crack at his expense at one point, but Nick was good people, and it wasn't meant mean-spiritedly. Nick was a buddy, and if anything the joke only reminded people that all was well, and things could go back to normal. Conner was neither popular nor unpopular enough to merit protracted bullying, after all.

The Northside Nighthawks thronged the hallways, relaxed after their winter break. Neither test nor essay nor group project threatened their happiness. The voice of Miss Jackson on the morning announcements had an uncharacteristically lyrical quality to it. Here and there, Conner recognized a few new students who'd transferred in at break navigating the halls with their school planner and its map in hand, his peers and teachers pausing to offer assistance. Yessir, Conner was glad to be back where he belonged.

His own spring semester schedule was a mixed bag, but more good than bad. Conner's years of denial of the graduation requirement for PE meant it was at last time to submit to Health and Fitness with Coach Conrad, a real meathead's meathead. He and Owen had had Mr. Conrad for sex ed as sophomores, and still giggled sometimes about the way the coach's "relaxed" pose was standing in front of the room flexing every muscle in his barrel-sized chest. Both Hailey *and* Hayleigh were in his psychology class, and it was immediately surreal seeing his classmates leering at the chunky legs of Hayleigh in her off-season skirt, while ignoring how amazing Hailey's boobs looked in her winter sweater. Luckily the seating chart was alphabetical, so he was spared the added discomfort of sitting next to her, but it did mean he was immediately in front of Jordan Lyons. Mercifully, for once Jordan seemed content to ignore him.

In further good news, he had econ this semester, and like his government class last semester, Angelica was in the same section. It meant for a handy study partner, and besides, while she wasn't very studious, she *had* taken this before in her normal high school career. Plus, having been an adult, with a job and all, that had to help in understanding economics... right? Additionally, a schedule change had landed Owen in the same earth space science, their first class together since first semester junior year, and since Dr. Laugherty didn't believe in seating charts, they were in it together.

"So how's your new schedule?" he asked while they were working on answering the reading questions.

"Dude, solid. For me, anyway. Angelica's in two of my classes. I swear to god, she spent almost the whole period staring at my crotch, man."

Conner sighed. "Here's hoping she can pay enough attention to be able to pass."

"It's foods and Brit lit. Foods is a blowoff, and Mr. Shepherd doesn't do shit. He just assigns reading and sits at his desk watching ESPN. His student aid does all the grading, and Lindsey's not gonna flunk me. Besides, she already has a diploma. I don't think employers are looking for applicants who double-majored in high school and more high school."

"That was her line, and I was there when she said it. Don't try to pass her stuff off as yours. It degrades discourse."

Owen shrugged it off. "How 'bout yours?"

Conner went through his own pros and cons of it, talked about how weird it was sharing a locker room with a bunch of dudes still finishing up puberty.

"Hey, speaking of pubes—"

"I wasn't, actually."

"Heather in any of your classes?"

Conner shook his head. "Just yearbook. She's in almost all honors and AP classes."

"Yearbook still last period?" Conner nodded. "How you think it's gonna go?"

For a moment, Conner was about to ask him how he knew about him and Miss C. Kristy Coszic-Lewandoski, the young-ish journalism and English teacher, was also the yearbook coordinator. And now, thanks to TIOS, a tender memory in which she'd told him she wanted him to be happy had culminated in her keeping him after school the last day before break and making him *very* happy. They hadn't spoken since, and with the hubbub of winter break keeping him busy, he hadn't given her much thought until returning to school today. Since then, however, it had been hard to think of much else.

He had had *sex*. With *Miss C*. That was something he'd told exactly no one. Owen was a friend, but he could have a big mouth sometimes. And running his mouth here could get Miss C fired, or worse.

Presently, however, he stopped himself and remembered he was only asking about Heather. "Oh. Probably pretty awkward. I don't know. She was cool to me after the whole, you know, incident."

"You've got to stop referring to one time fainting for like three seconds as 'The Incident,' man."

"Shut up. So hopefully she'll still be all right. Who knows, maybe she recons—"

"She didn't. Don't do that, dude. You'll torture yourself. She's not that into you. It sucks, but them's the breaks."

"Yeah. Yeah, you're probably right."

Miss C opened the new semester with a long list of projects in search of personnel, and a batch of her celebrated homemade blueberry lemon bread to compensate. Heather arrived before he did, and in the lax setting of the yearbook classroom, he opted to sit a ways away. He figured he wouldn't look too eager that way, or like he couldn't take a hint. (Or did he now look like he was sulking? Optics!)

She smiled at him when he came in, but beyond that, there was little to do for most of the class but ride the TIOS train. Conner was excited, actually. This was an overview of many of the biggest events of this semester. The King of Hearts Dance, prom, spring sports, science olympiad, the cross-town classic basketball game, and of course, graduation. This Is Our Story would be in publication by then, of course, but they still squeezed in as much as they could before the print deadline, and found a few students willing to try on their cap and gown early for a photo or two. Once he and Miss C had upcoming projects and ongoing assignments delegated, it was time to get to the grindstone and start preparing spreads. Little did Conner realize, however, that the period was far from over.

First off, while he'd decided to take Owen's advice and give Conner a little space, it was in fact Heather who approached him. She looked incredible. Uncharacteristically so, in fact. While Heather's ample bosom was the subject of bountiful admiration, she'd adapted by simply dressing to cover them up. Days where Heather actually showed any skin on her chest were infrequent at best. Today, however, she was wearing the same blue shirt she'd worn on their second date, and again, two buttons down. If he wasn't mistaken, her bra was enhancing them in a way it hadn't been the last time he'd seen them.

"Ahem."

Conner blushed at realizing he'd been staring. "Oh gosh, I'm sorry. You just... sorry. You look great. Sorry."

"I think one apology will do," she said with a dry smile. "And it's probably a little bit on me. Ever since you reminded me before break about how I'd said I liked getting a little more attention for them, I guess... I dunno. I've honestly always tried to *avoid* getting them noticed, ever since the darn things sprouted in middle school. But I figured maybe I'd try the other way, ya know? See how I like it."

"Still, I shouldn't have... you know. It won't happen again."

Heather rolled her eyes and gave him a little swat on the arm. "Conner, seriously. It's OK. Like I said, I wouldn't have them out if I didn't like having them seen. And you... I mean, why get shy about something you've already seen, right?"

His mouth was drying up, he was so nervous. Lord, TIOS made things confusing. Her facial expression and body language said she wasn't trying to flirt, but the way she was talking... She was only saying it because of what she'd said before that made her believe what he said and then he'd said that she'd said... It was dizzying. Worse, he could already feel the temptation to type that up in the Heather Blake notes. For shame. He reminded himself he did *not* want his very own Angelica.

At least, not outside his imagination.

“Sure. Anyway, what’s up? I’m sure you didn’t walk over to talk about your, um, what-have-you’s.”

She blurted a surprised laugh. “Did you just call them ‘what-have-you’s’?”

“Just trying to find something you’re comfortable with.” She’d rebuked him for using the word “tits,” and on their first date he’d teased her a little for her sensitivity to the term.

“Right. Anyway, I know we talked about it, you know, over break, but we need to get the staff spread updated from the Christmas party. I mean, I know things didn’t wind up working out for you and me, but I want you to know that I am so grateful for what you did for me. And I don’t ever want to forget it.”

That brought a sheepish smile to his face, the memory of sticking up for her when she got a low grade on the final that could have cost her everything. And the expression of gratitude that had followed. “Me either.”

“I still can’t believe that old cunt Miss C was going to give me a C. Ugh.” She glared at where their teacher was helping Don organize his notes. “Pardon my French.”

Conner didn’t dare tell her that Miss C had only done that to set him up to be a hero, which he hadn’t learned until after school. “Yeah, no kidding. I know your work. You’ve never done C level work in your life.”

“Thanks. Anyway, shall we?”

The two spent the final twenty minutes of the period looking over photos from the yearbook holiday party. They shared a tender smile at one, in which someone had taken a few photos of Conner in the editor’s office defending Heather, then him slipping through the curtain into the computer lab to comfort her. Conner made a mental note to thank Marissa; for once her inclination to be nosy had yielded good fruit.

Their only interruption came from Jordan, actually. He poked his head into the editor’s office. “Hey, you got a sec, chief?”

“Sure. What’s up?”

“A private sec, I meant.” He eyed Heather, who took the hint and excused herself, letting him shut the door after her. After the jerkwad move Jordan had pulled after the inci— after he fainted, Conner didn’t have anything to say. He folded his arms across his chest and waited.

“So yeah, couple things. First off…” He took a breath. “Just to get it out of the way, I’m sorry for how things went down before break.”

The editor-in-chief blinked at what was easily the most roundabout, half-assed apology he’d heard in a while. Jordan, apparently seeing he wasn’t moved, continued. “I mean it. Like, I know I was supposed to say something Friday, but I was pissed at being stuck in the suspension room all day and I know me. It wouldn’t have been shit. But now that things calmed down, I still feel kinda shitty about it, so… hey, for whatever it’s worth, sorry.”

Conner considered it and supposed it was the best he was likely to get. “All right. We’re cool.”

Jordan smiled, so much so that Conner reevaluated his estimation of the guy's remorsefulness. If being forgiven made him smile so much, maybe he really had been taking it hard. "Awesome. So, with that out of the way, another thing. So you know how I got assigned to the spread for that stupid-ass diversity event?"

He meant the MLK, Jr. Day march and rally, Conner deduced. "Yeah, I guess so. What's up?"

"Right. Well, you know I don't like, speak PCese, right?"

Conner frowned. "What are PCE's?"

Jordan sighed irritably. "I'm not politically correct, dumb fuck." He stopped himself. "Sorry. It's, you know, hard to talk about. Anyway, so like, I don't want it to look like shit, 'cause I know Miss C'll be pissed if that one looks sketchy, so I wondered if maybe you could help me out with it?"

"Me? Why me? I'm not exactly the expert on blackness." He rolled up his sleeve to show the white skin. "Don't you think you'd be better off getting help from someone who's more involved in that arena? If you don't feel comfortable doing it, I don't think it's bad to let an actual person of color weigh in or take over, if you can find someone interested."

Jordan frowned. "Dude, I may not know PC culture, but I know you're not supposed to call them colored people."

"It's..." The dismissal bell rang then, and he decided this wasn't the time to bring Jordan up to speed. "Nevermind. Fine. But I'm not doing it for you, understand? Have something written up, and I'll help you look it over."

"Right. Cool man. Appreciate it. Catch you later."

With that, Jordan was gone before Conner could even reply. The blinds overlooking the classroom were open, and Heather had disappeared as well, along with the rest of the class. But before he could even crane his neck to see if Miss C was still in her room, she was there in the office doorway.

"Hi, Conner."

"Heya, Kristy."

She smiled. "You remembered."

"I had a good teacher."

A student popped into the classroom, and Miss C excused herself to field their question, something about some binder. When they left, she asked if he minded giving her a few minutes, until the halls were good and clear. After what she'd done for him before break, he agreed instantly, and texted Angelica to go ahead and drive herself and Owen home, as she had a set of keys to his car for emergencies. No one else entered, and Conner tried to pretend he wasn't watching his teacher as she organized some papers on her desk while the seconds ticked by. Five minutes felt like an hour, waiting for her to return, though he'd have waited all night to hear what she wanted to talk to him about, whatever it was.

At last, they were closed in the cozy confines of the editor's office, blinds closed, door locked, the classroom beyond sealed and dark as well. Conner tried not to get over-eager as he watched her arrange for their privacy, but it wasn't easy. She hadn't even dressed out of the ordinary today, and he'd seen her wear this knee-length skirt and sweater many times, but today, having seen what was beneath it, suddenly the mundane had become alluring. When she settled, it was on the edge of his desk. Right where Hailey had sat the first time they'd fooled around in here, where she'd positioned herself at the start of their fling two weeks ago. *Play it cool, Fishers*, he reminded himself, then wondered why he'd called himself by his surname.

"How was your break?" she asked casually. Her legs crossed at the ankles.

"Oh. Decent, I guess. Got a tablet, which is pretty cool. I was hoping for a laptop, but ya know, money's tight, and I was glad for what I got."

"See any family? Travel anywhere?"

"Nah, not really. My extended family lives out in New Mexico, and my stepdad's family isn't close. At least, not with him." He shrugged. "Other than their wedding, I've never even seen most of them."

"And, you know I've been wondering... how did things go with Heather?"

Like that, his budding erection wilted. With a little coaxing, he told her. Unlike Hailey, it didn't feel weird to share. Unlike Owen and Angelica, she gave him her full attention. And unlike his mom, he could share the lurid details without worrying he'd look like a loser. In fact, he even thanked her for that very thing as he finished his rambling play-by-play of his too-short fling.

"I've met your mother several times, Conner. There's no way she'd ever think less of you. And I'm sorry things didn't work out. You two seemed like such a good match, and with the help you said you received from TIOS, I'm actually somewhat surprised. I guess the timing just wasn't right." She patted him on the shoulder.

"Yeah, I guess not. She's still pissed off about that fake C on the exam, too, by the way."

His teacher laughed softly. "She'll get over it. Or not."

Conner decided to switch gears. Talking about being dumped only reminded him of how lousy it had felt to begin with, which he'd been doing a decent job of forgetting all day to that point. "How about you? Have a fun holiday?"

She shrugged. "Meh. I got caught up on grading, and that only took the first week. Then I got caught up on planning, which only took until ten o'clock last night. But when I wasn't being a good teacher, I had fun, yes. Got some good reading in, which was nice."

"Oh yeah?"

"Yes. A little philosophical reading, about the nature of free will versus determinism."

Conner frowned. He had a pretty good vocabulary for a twelfth-grader, but he had gaps. "Determinism...?"

"The idea that our actions are predestined. That choice is an illusion, and that our lives are simply the process of carrying out the script that was written before we began."

“Sounds... bleak.” Conner wrinkled his nose.

“It can be. But I also find there’s something freeing – perhaps ironically so – about the idea that some of the things that happen are beyond our control.”

“How is losing control freeing? It sounds more scary than liberating.”

“Well, you know me, let me illustrate it with an example. Suppose something terrible happened, and that rather than some act of nature, a person was responsible for that terrible thing. Say, more specifically, a loved one was killed in a car accident by a driver who was sending a text message. Now, someone who believes stolidly in free will would contend that the other driver was culpable, that they made the choice to neglect their responsibilities as a driver.”

“Yeah. They did. How else do you look at that?”

“Well, a determinist might see it simply as a bad thing happened, and that while a person did it, there was no malice behind it, that the person was doing something lots of people do all the time and that day it happened to cause a problem.”

“They’d just let them off the hook? If some jerk sending a text killed someone I love, you bet I’d be pressing charges.”

“Sure, let’s pursue that. So you’re angry at them, and nobody could fault you for that. And that anger, it can eat at you, widen the hole your loved one left behind. Because you’re fixated on assigning blame, rather than understanding the event that happened for what it was and simply grieving.”

“I can’t do both? Be mad *and* grieve?”

“I’m not saying one is better than the other; only that I can see why someone might feel the latter is liberating, and the former is stifling. And that’s when you apply it to someone else. If you’ve ever been inattentive at the wheel – drinking, exhausted, distracted by a friend, whatever – imagine how it would feel to be held responsible for the consequences of an innocent mistake, and how comforting it might feel to have your mistake acknowledged as a tragic aspect of life.”

Conner shook himself. “If you’re trying to scare me into never goofing around in the car again, it’s working.”

“I didn’t read the book just to lecture at you, I promise.”

“Is that the kind of thing you usually read? I guess since you’re an English teacher, in my head your house is filled with Shakespeare and the classics and the so-called Great Books.” She smiled; he’d remembered her lectures from freshman English about the notion of there being a set of texts somehow on another level from normal books. She’d always tried to encourage kids to read whatever they liked, so long as they were reading. Not a lesson Conner had needed, but maybe it had inspired some of his peers.

“I definitely don’t read Shakespeare,” she said, chuckling. “And no, it’s not my usual sort of book. But after learning that I’d had my mind re-wired, I was curious what there was to be done about it.”

Conner froze. “Oh gosh. I... I didn’t even see it like that. You’re right, though. Oh gosh, I didn’t mean to...!”

Before he could hyperventilate – oh god, or faint again – she placed both hands firmly on his shoulders and looked him hard in the eyes. “Conner. I am not angry with you. I wasn’t then, and I’m not now. I’m your friend, and I care about you, and that was true before TIOS ever intervened. Tell me you understand.”

He took a few deep breaths. “I understand. But—”

“No. Understanding means accepting. Don’t ruin it by qualifying it.” She gave him a long moment to process, and when the panic from realizing he’d wronged someone he cared for subsided, he started breathing normally again.

“See? It’s liberating, isn’t it.” She flashed a tight smile.

Conner chuckled self-consciously. “Is *that* why you read it?”

“No. If you really want to know, I wanted to see if... How to put this. Not looking for a loophole, per se, but for some way to understand whether I still had free will; or if I ever did; or if I’d lost it, how I could get it back.”

“Wow. Um, what did you decide?”

“I don’t know. I knew trying to undo TIOS wouldn’t make you happy, so... I stopped pursuing it. But if my Reader’s Digest synopsis gave you any relief, I’m glad. Remember, Conner. At least where it pertains to me, you didn’t do anything on purpose. Even a staunch advocate of free will would have a hard time faulting you for recording a pleasant memory simply because... well.”

Conner knew he’d be spending up late that night staring at the ceiling of his bedroom trying to decide to what extent his other meddlings had been mere accidents, and to what extent he was culpable. But for now, he was here, as was she.

“So yeah, speaking of pertaining to us...”

She smiled. “You want to talk about what comes next?”

“Well... yeah. Kind of my first time hooking up with a teacher.”

“My first time hooking up with a student. Since I was one myself, at least.” She smiled, then moved over to the loveseat on the far wall. “Do you want to sit with me? Or would that be uncomfortable?”

“No, that’d be cool.” The couch was broad, almost a full sofa, but it was a more appropriate place to discuss a relationship than sitting at a desk with his teacher looming over him. He joined her, folding one foot under his knee.

“So, I think we’ve established where I’m at in all this. Which is to say, I want you to be happy. If being given your space will do that, that’s what I want to do... and so on. So the question seems to be, what do *you* want to happen?” She could tell the question immediately made him feel anxious, and quickly added, “And please speak freely, Conner. No judgments here. This is a bit of a unique situation, so there’s no expectation on my part whatsoever.”

“I... I don’t know. I mean, I had, you know, fun, before break. A lot of fun. But... you know, you have Brent, and I already feel bad about that as it is.” As it so happened, Conner had



been so preoccupied by matters with Heather that he hadn't given a single thought to his teacher's boyfriend until right that moment, but once it occurred to him, he did.

"Don't. Brent and I broke up more than a month ago, right around Thanksgiving." She didn't tell him right then that it had been in part because her increasing preoccupation with her students had bothered him so, or that she'd realized she couldn't bother herself to worry about Brent's happiness when and if it came up against Conner's. Once more, she reminded herself that it wasn't the boy's fault, and spilling the beans definitely would not make him happy.

"Oh. You never said. I... I'm sorry. I mean, I guess I'm glad we didn't... that you didn't... but yeah, sorry."

"Don't be. So. Brent's out of the picture. I'll ask again, what do *you* want to happen between us?"

He was quiet for a long while, thinking, though the thoughts centered primarily around what had transpired between them the last time he'd been on this couch with her. Finally he made himself address the situation at hand, trying to be as objective as possible. She waited patiently; no sense hurrying a major decision.

"I had a lot of fun before," he said at last. Again. "But, I guess I also don't want to do anything that you could get in trouble for. If we kept... you know, and anybody found out... It could end your career. I mean, I'm legally an adult and all so *that's* not an issue, but I don't even know if a teacher fooling around with a student is a separate law altogether."

"It's not, at least not in this state. School policy only." She gave a weird little smile. "Another bit of reading I did over break."

"Yeah. But still, I don't want you to get fired, either. You're an awesome teacher, and more important, you're my friend. I'd feel awful if somebody found out and we got caught. So... I guess I think maybe we should, you know, call it a one-time thing, or whatever."

"Now like I said before, I want whatever is going to make you happy, but I will say this. If you're pushing me away because you're afraid, that doesn't sound like happy. If you're pushing me away because you're happier without the complications, then that's fine."

"It sounds like you're arguing for us to keep on... like that."

"I'm not. But in the spirit of full disclosure, I'll say this. TIOS isn't gentle about the way it enforces your rewrites of our stories, Conner. If you'd be happier having me quit my job so I could be your girlfriend openly with no career hassles, I'd do that. So unfortunately, you're going to have to rely on your own judgment here, and I'll do my best to help out."

His eyes widened. "You'd really...?"

"Yes. Do you want me to?"

"No!"

She smiled. "Good. I like getting to see you every day, and I'd be sad not to see how our story ends. So I tell you what. You seem like you're having a lot of thoughts on this. Why don't you go home tonight, do some processing, and we can talk again tomorrow?"

"Yeah. Yeah, that sounds good, Miss... Kristy."

“I swear, it’s a matter of time before you meet in the middle and start calling me Misty. Now, is there anything else I can do to make you happy before you go?” She sat up straight, leaned a little closer. There was nothing overtly sexual in it, but somehow, it still got him hard in an instant. *I said, play it cool, Fishers!*

“Why, Miss Coszic-Lewandoski, you’re trying to seduce me, aren’t you?” Conner had watched that movie last summer with his stepdad. Not his cup of tea, but he’d been trying to take his mom’s advice and look for things to do together, to bond. It hadn’t produced much.

“I’m trying to ascertain if you’d like to be seduced,” she answered.

In truth, Conner hadn’t gotten off since the night of his first date with Heather. Even then, it had only come after, once he’d gotten home. Then leading up to the second date, he’d been “saving up” – something Owen told him was the opposite of what he ought to be doing – but then the second one had gone so tepidly that he hadn’t felt the urge since. (To say nothing of the boner-negation that was being dumped.)

“A k-kiss...?” He leaned forward slightly extending his neck.

Rather than meet him halfway, however, his teacher rolled toward him, throwing one leg over his lap and straddling him. Without saying a word, she sank down onto his crotch, the only thing stopping him from being inside her being a few pesky layers of clothing. Then, her lips were on his, and in the next breath, their mouths were open, and her tongue was invading to dance against his. She took one of his hands in each of hers, lifting them over his head and pressing them to the wall behind the couch. It left him feeling completely exposed – and yet, he didn’t feel anxious at all.

“Anything else?”

He hadn’t even realized she’d stopped kissing him. His hands were still in hers, though, and she was still hovering right over his lap. Her breasts were right in front of his face. *Right* in front. Like they were being held out to him for sampling. She removed her hair tie, letting her wavy brown hair cascade around her shoulders.

“One more, maybe?”

Again. This time, she didn’t let up until they were each breathing hard, hearts racing. How did a *teacher* know how to use her body like that?! “Are you happy yet?” she whispered, her breath hot against his lips.

“Getting there, I think.”

She lowered herself a bit, squirming her pussy against him as she licked up his neck to his ear, where she sucked the lobe into her mouth and lashed it with her tongue. “Tell me how to make you happy, Conner.”

He could have sex with her again, right now. He knew it. All he had to do was say the word, and she’d do it, and she’d be glad for it. Or he could get a blowjob. A handjob. She could do all three, and then show him some things he hadn’t even thought of, probably. All he had to do was say the words.

“I need the night to think about it,” he said, and she was still looking at his retreating backside in confusion as he scurried out of the room.

It snowed all that evening, but Conner barely noticed. For him, the entire night was consumed by his dilemma. He'd accidentally rewired his teacher to be fixated on his happiness. The thing was, he'd always had a solid relationship with Miss C. He wouldn't have said she made him "happy," per se, but he loved her class, and she made him better at what he was passionate about. Plus, while he was as prone to teenage angst as anyone, Conner was usually not an unhappy person. He liked school well enough, was content with his social life, and if he wished he'd done better with Heather, it was less a case of a burning need for companionship and more because he was genuinely interested in a particular girl. He didn't *need* anyone to make him happy.

That said, there was no denying that his attractive English teacher had some new and intriguing means of making him happier. Conner wasn't the sort to be prone to crushing on women who were out of his zone of possibility, but he'd certainly developed more than a few fantasies about her over the years. They'd always been merely that, fantasies, but all of the sudden, the fantastical was right in that zone. He might be able to be happy without her, but being *with* her had been incredible. Though he knew the mid-twenties teacher wasn't *old*, she was certainly older than any other girl he'd fooled around with, and the contrast was sharp. She was mature, aggressive, confident, practiced. Of the three girls he had any significant experience with, she was easily the most talented lover.

Except she was his teacher. And she hadn't asked for this. But now that her happiness was so tied to his own, did he owe it to her? Now that fate had laid his fantasies at his feet, did he owe it to himself?

Soon enough, he boiled the question down to the simple matter of whether or not he wanted a sexual relationship with his teacher. There were other considerations, sure, but that was the most weighty. In time, he finally tried to organize his thoughts in a pros and cons list.

*Pros*

- *exciting!*
- *attracted to her*
- *single (her/me)*
- *learn ropes from experienced partner – better 4 college*
- *she likes doing it 2*
- *help get over heather*

*Cons*

- *getting caught*
  - *fired!*
  - *reputation ruined (hers; mine?)*
  - *rumors*
  - *what will mom think*
- *would she be my angelica*

He stared at that page for over an hour, but still didn't know what he'd do. From her behavior today, and her enthusiasm from before break, Conner would bet heavily that if he didn't make a decision, Miss C would decide it for him, and she'd decide to use every angle toward making him happy at her disposal. And the more he thought about it, the more likely he thought they could keep it secret. They already worked closely together, and it wasn't like he was going to start groping her in the middle of class. Even if someone did get suspicious, TIOS might be useful to help cover for it, if for once he could make it do what he wanted on purpose.

Still, even if they did keep it entirely clandestine, that still left that final bullet.

Around ten o'clock, he heard the front door. That would be Angelica, home from her night of screwing around at Owen's. With a glance at the final bullet on his list, he headed for the hallway and intercepted her on her way into her bedroom. He tried to ignore the telltale smudges in her lipstick.

"Hey, Angelica. Can we talk for a minute?"

She sighed. "I guess, but let me just say up front that I am not getting involved between you and Heather."

"It's not about Heather," he assured her.

Angelica looked surprised. "Oh. OK, then." She followed him into his bedroom; though they'd gotten closer since she'd hooked up with Owen, he was still persona non grata in hers. He flopped down on his bed, and, sensing this might be more than a basic question, she settled into his desk chair.

"So, before I say anything, I need you to promise me that you will keep this totally between us. Not even Owen can know about it. All right?"

Her eyes narrowed. "Why do I feel like I'm about to find out something I didn't want to know?"

"Promise."

"Hey, you're the one who dragged me into this. I don't have to promise shit."

"*Promise*, Angelica. Or I can tell your dad where you're really going every evening."

She gritted her teeth. "Blackmail, huh. Whatever. Fine, cross my heart and all that crap. Now what's going on?"

Thankfully, her outburst at the revelation was mistaken by their parents in the living room as the two of them fighting. "Quiet down, you two – and it's a school night, get to bed," yelled Conner's stepdad, though both knew full well he had no intention of enforcing it.

"You *fucked* your *teacher*?! What the hell, Conner! I thought you were trying to be more responsible with this thing! First me, then Heather, and now your journalism teacher? Jesus Christ, Conner, why don't you just start up a fucking harem already while you're at it!"

"I didn't mean to, OK! I mean, with you, Owen and I were trying to see what TIOS did. Neither of us thought it was going to do... that! And with Miss C and Heather, I was just writing

down memories. I've done like fifteen spreads this year – how was I supposed to know these would somehow transcend the laws of reality!”

“Why are you even telling me this? Am I supposed to tell you how to woo an older woman or something? Because I am not your date coach.”

“No, it's not that. It's...” He took a breath, and explained their interaction today after school. He kept it vague on the details of the kissing and all, but made it clear the terms he'd been offered. “And now, I don't know what to do. And since, I dunno, you're in kind of a similar position, I wondered...”

Angelica looked skeptical. “So, because you made me obsessed with Owen's cock, you think I'm, what, an expert on being a fuck buddy?”

“Well... sorta, yeah. Three months in, and you guys seem like you're making the best of things, doing good keeping it under wraps. I just hoped you'd be able to help me do the right thing.”

After a brief pause, Angelica burst into laughter. “I literally don't think I've ever had someone ask *me* what the right thing to do was before!” she forced out.

“I'm serious, Angelica! Come on, for once in our lives let's pretend like we're a normal pair of siblings, and not two people whose only similarity is approximate age.”

“Fine. All right. So. Right thing to do. Hmm.” She stroked her chin, but so far as Conner could tell, she seemed to be giving it real thought. “OK. So, the quote was what, exactly?”

“Something like, ‘you mean the world to me, and all I want is for you to be happy.’ Pretty close to that, if not verbatim.”

“Wow. Yikes, that's... strong.” She saw him looking at her quizzically. “I mean, take me. I said, because I didn't think I lived in a world where magic yearbooks could fry your brain, that I couldn't get enough of Owen's cock. And now... it's literally true. The only reasons I ever stop going to town on that puppy are the limits of his stamina and that I know no matter how much I get, I'll want more. So why bother chasing a moving goalpost, ya know?”

Conner rolled over to look up at the ceiling. “Scary to think TIOS, for all its power, doesn't have the ability to distinguish between truth and bullshit. One day Owen was an obnoxious pest who was always driving you crazy, and the next... Like, if we'd quoted you reading MacBeth, you'd be trying to kill your uncle.”

She laughed. “Well, I wouldn't say it was *totally* off the mark.”

He flipped over to look at her, eyebrow arched as high as it would go. “What?”

“I mean...” she broke eye contact, looking at the same spot on the ceiling his gaze had just vacated. “I know he's a skeezy little perv and all, but... I dunno. I always kinda liked him. Not in a way where I probably ever would've given him a shot, unless I were totally drunk. It was fun, getting hit on and getting to keep saying no but knowing he'd keep going. From him, anyway.” She shrugged. “And speaking of not saying shit, you tell him I said that and I will castrate you in your sleep.”

But Conner was only considering the ramifications of her words. Could that be why some of the quotes he'd entered came true, and some seemed not to do anything? That he'd noticed, anyway. Hard to credit Coach Conrad saying that his boys were hard workers with their victory at conference, but maybe. But then what about the Hailey-Hayleigh swap? Or Heather and her trust issues? Could it be she'd really had so much faith in him, even before that? Maybe Angelica's small interest in Owen and the fact that TIOS had enforced that quote were unrelated.

Angelica, however, was tired from a long night of sucking cock, and interrupted his musings. "So look. I can't tell you what to do, but I'll say this. I've had a lot of fun the past few months. I'm not some brainless bimbo. Whenever Owen's being an asshole, I tell him and make damn sure he fixes it. Maybe for the first time in my life, I know what I want, and I know how to get it. For me, at least, it feels... right."

Conner was dressed and ready and ready to speed his way to school already when his mother informed him that there was going to be a snow day. For the first time in his life, he was disappointed at the news, but looking outside, he saw what looked like close to a foot of snow piled on top of his car. The roads here were clear, but enough of the student body lived in more rural parts of town that it wouldn't be true for everyone. His stepdad still headed to work, not one to be deterred by a little thing like a forty-five minute commute through a snowstorm, leaving Conner, his mother and stepsister at home.

He considered texting to see if he and Miss C could meet up, but he didn't want to start his top secret affair by creating a document trail. Besides, it felt too much like a booty call, and he was determined he was going to make sure he treated her with respect. Just because TIOS wasn't putting the idea in his head, he wanted to make her happy, too.

So, he fidgeted. Even though Conner's mother had told Angelica the roads weren't safe enough for her to go out in, his stepsister still snuck out while her back was turned. The footprints in the snow leading from their driveway across the street told the tale for anyone to see, but who was looking?

Only then, something surreal happened. The doorbell rang.

"Conner, sweetie, it's for you!" his mother called.

Who could it be? Normally, he'd assume Owen, only Owen would simply walk in, not ring the doorbell, and besides, he was no doubt enjoying a leisurely day with the house to himself and his... girlfriend? They didn't use those terms, but it was basically true.

His jaw literally dropped when he saw who it was. "Jordan? What the f... What are you doing here?"

Jordan was kicking the snow off his boots as Conner's mother closed the door behind him. "Hey, buddy. Thought we could tackle that spread we talked about. Zat cool?"

"Uh... what?"

"Remember, yesterday? The MLK thing? You said you'd help?"

Conner blinked. "Uh, yeah. But... what? What are you doing here? It's a snow day."

Jordan laughed, allowing Conner's mother to help him with his coat. She shot a pointed glance at her son to be polite to their guest. "Yeah, I know, but my parents are super pissed – pardon my French, Mrs. Fishers – about my grades. So I'm trying to get them off my back, show I'm going the extra mile and all that, uh, jazz."

He didn't bother to point out that his mother was Mrs. Buck, not Fishers. Still, Mrs. Buck was looking at her son with a clear expectation of being a good host. He hadn't vented to her about all the crap Jordan had put him through; he didn't want her to think less of him. Which made his presence here all the more jarring.

He had a sudden epiphany, a means of removing Jordan without having to be rude. "Wait a minute. This is for the MLK spread?"

"Yeah, that's what I said."

"That's not until next Monday. You do know when MLK Day is, right?"



“Ya, I know when it is, chief,” he said, smiling brightly. From the chummy way he was acting, his mother must think they were friends. “But I remember you said it’s never a bad idea to get prepped before the event, so when it happens you can just, you know, plug in the details, fill in a quote or two, paste a couple pictures in, and voila. That was you, right?”

Miss C had given the same instructions a hundred times – her constant cure for students who claimed they were all caught up – but he’d certainly echoed it. It wasn’t his style, personally – he liked to witness first and transcribe second – but it worked for a lot of his staffers. “Yeah, I guess that was me.”

“Tight. Shall we?”

His mind raced to come up with any other reasons to not let Jordan Lyons into his home. Apology or no, he’d gone out of his way to humiliate Conner after Heather rejected him. He was probably the person most responsible for the fainting spell. “Oh! Yeah, sorry, but I didn’t check out a laptop. So, unfortunately, we can’t–”

“Sall good, buddy,” Jordan said, cocking a grin. “I got one right here.”

Since Conner handled the lion’s share of yearbook assignments, it was no coincidence that he and Jordan had never worked together on a spread before. And now that he knew what it was like, he’d never let it happen again. The kid was *constantly* distracted, and totally unprepared. He made Conner start up the spread while he groomed his hair, citing “frozen gel,” and then he paced around the room relentlessly while they talked it over. On three separate occasions, he stumbled over the power cord, and of course, he’d let the battery die without charging it before bringing it over, and forced them to sit there twiddling their thumbs as they waited for it to reboot, load up TIOS, and for Conner to log back in.

Conner finally insisted that he sit down before he went crazy, and finally Jordan seemed to buckle down. It was really a pretty simple set-up. It wasn’t a major event, so no need to do a deluxe spread. The themes were prescriptive, so all they had to do was emphasize the school’s diversity. The school’s website had more detailed information on the school’s racial breakdown, and even shared that they had one of the top graduation rates for students of color – a term Conner now explained to his classmate – of any high school in the state. After an hour’s work, the two had reached a point where Conner felt comfortable putting a pin in it.

“So on Monday, get a pass and a camera in the morning. Go to the rally, snap a few pictures, get a few quotes. Try not to say anything offensive, OK? Just ask what Dr. King’s legacy means to them, what they thought of the speaker, that kind of thing. Cool?”

“You got it, chief. Hey, thanks for this. Didn’t mean to rain on your snow day or anything. Just looking to get a headstart on the future, ya know?” He grinned broadly, and as ever, it failed to fill Conner with a warm or fuzzy feeling.

“Right. I’ll see you tomorrow.” He followed Jordan to the door, where his mother was already tugging on her boots.

“Hi, boys. You get everything done?” To avoid an entanglement, she grabbed Jordan’s coat off the hook and held it out for him to insert his arms in the sleeves.

With his back to her, Jordan made a face Conner liked not at all, all the less because it was accompanied by him saying, “Oh, there’s another thing or two I wanted to do, but... maybe I’ll swing by some other day for that.”

Conner glared. “I think we can restrict our work to school, Jordan.”

“Hey, you got it chief.” He reciprocated, helping Conner’s mother on with her own coat. “Wouldn’t want you going out without this, would we? Slender thing like you probably freeze to death.”

Her cheeks flushed, and she patted him playfully. “Oh stop it.”

“Yeah, really. Stop it,” Conner added.

Then he did, and then he was gone, and the whole bizarre experience was over as suddenly as it began. The snow didn’t melt overnight, but it didn’t get any deeper either. So when school opened the next day, Conner proceeded immediately to Miss C’s room. He was hustling so quickly he actually got yelled at to slow down by Mr. Durnes. She was already in her room when he entered, her hair up in its usual ponytail.

“Kristy? I’m ready to be happy,” he announced, beaming.

“Please don’t use my first name, Conner,” she said sternly, frowning.

He was dumbfounded. She’d literally *trained* him to call her that when they were...

“And, while we’re on the subject of names... Conner Fishers, this is Amanda Carpenter. She’s a new student this semester, and she’ll be joining us in yearbook.”

Stepping out of the editor’s office was, apparently, Amanda. She extended a hand. “Hi, Conner. I’m looking forward to seeing what you can bring to the team.”

He shook hands, forcing a smile. “I was just thinking the same thing.”

Miss C interjected. “I should clarify, sorry. You see, you’re speaking to the editor-in-chief.”

Conner inclined his head, as if to forgive the minor slight – but was puzzled to see Amanda do the same, followed by a puzzled look of her own.

“Wait, who’s...?”

“Both of you, that is. It appears our yearbook is back up to two editors.”



