

The Teacher's Strike
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ARC EDITION

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Prologue

"NO SCHOOL TODAY AND MAYBE NOT EVER AGAIN! all our teachers are boycotting work."

That was the eruption that started everything on Facebook. Within forty minutes there were a hundred thirty-six replies in the Comment thread, and a thousand comments by noon, sounding bells in kids' ears all around this big Windy City. But this time the bells were canceling school altogether, not tolling the death knell of first period or the end of lunch.

I'm Telly. Actually, my mom named me *Aristotle*, but, for reasons I'm sure you can appreciate, that fact has remained a secret I've guarded with violence since I was in the third grade. I've gone by Telly ever since. People tend to think it's short for *Telory*, and, believe me, I don't rob them of that assumption.

I live in Chicago, where I was born, bred and buttered my whole life. I'm nineteen and a "troubled" kid. I have an "attitude problem," the school authorities like to say. In fact, I've been clinically diagnosed with Oppositional Defiant Disorder. I never got such an ego-boost in my life. I've racked up six high schools in two years and have grown quite proud of the fact. If I had a knack for arts and crafts, I'd make a project out of my academic history by forging trophy cups commemorating five dropouts and one championship expulsion.

I am troubled, that's true, but not for defying authority. I am just now parsing through my thoughts and feelings on the first—and, I fear, the greatest—romance of my young life. It seems all downhill from here.

What I mean is, I'm just now reflecting on a lurid affair with my high school teacher.

Now, wait a minute before you react. I know what you're thinking: *skeevy* or *stupid* or *fuck yeah, right on* and all that, the word choice depending on your point of view. But it's not what you think. True, it's perhaps a shameful enough secret that I have to write it down here, as if in diary form. I really don't have the guts to tell anyone about it. Or maybe I just don't have any close friends whom I can trust. That's not self-pity, by the way, just the facts I live with.

You may have even heard about it on the nightly news or read about it in the papers when the scandal broke some months ago, and all of Chicago sopped up the story like cream pudding. But this—what I'm typing here—is the story you wouldn't have heard. Across these pages are the underlying details overshadowed by one or two remorseless facts. Technically, she was my teacher; I was her student. But that's where the hazy distinction ends and the invisible truth begins.

No one in my life would understand. I can't tell anyone in my scant circle of friends and cousins because they'd re-blather the story to their friends and acquaintances who wouldn't care at all for such details that don't live up to their scandalous liking. I can't tell the few people in my immediate family, who are the judge, jury and wardens of my life's petty annoyances as it is. Besides, they're unshakably biased toward portraying me as the victim and her as a treacherous cougar who mauled my innocence.

And I certainly can't tell the co-originator of my real-life fantasy, because we're not on the best of terms right now. Actually, that's not accurate. She won't talk to me.

So I pen the story here—a willing confession to try and put this episode behind me, joys and pains and all. Maybe then I can make something of it and move on.

Chapter One

In some ways, attending a new school was always the same for me. You could say I had it down, as far as the process goes. I walk through the halls. People see me but look past me, or they glance at me and look away. I tend to avoid eye contact, myself, but I'm constantly observing my surroundings, playing the movie star of my own thoughts, entertained by internal games of perception or eccentric physical feats.

My mom would make it a point of notifying the school authorities that I don't answer to Aristotle. "You have to call him Telly," she would tell them pointedly, making sure they understood and didn't just humor her. Otherwise, if she didn't warn them, I'd be marked perpetually absent.

My poor mom. How embarrassing that must have been to her, explaining to each principal, in a serious way, that her son must be called a certain derivative of his name, or else he wouldn't respond to any attempted form of communication. She started following up personally when one school removed me from their computer after I'd been marked absent for two weeks straight. Perpetually absent. Maybe I was, anyway. Sometimes I wondered what I was looking for in a school in the first place.

It wasn't all fun and games, zigzagging through schools like playing slalom. I really was looking for something, or at least I thought I was. I wanted to belong. I wanted to be able to say, "I go to such-and-such school." I based my decisions of which school to pursue next around how each school was represented in my head. At some points I had a running list, down the line, of schools I wanted to try next.

Growing up, you know that every other school in the city has a sort of character—personality, even. Yours is the school that all others are compared to. But not for me. To me, every other school was a style of living, a reputation, an image that I wanted to precede me wherever I went. There also seemed to be something I was searching for before I felt ready to move on from high school. I didn't quite know what it was yet.

The trouble was, the reputation, or charm, perhaps, would wear off after a while, and then I'd tender my resignation, so to speak. Knowing in advance that no one could understand or appreciate the philosophy I used to try out schools, I'd describe my decisions in terms of job opportunity. When family nagged at me, in that shaming sort of tone that they dressed up in polite, concerned terms—"What's wrong, Telly?" or "Think about your future and where you'll end up."

Smugly answering their constant queries about why I left this or that school, I would simply say, "I no longer felt the institution had anything left to offer me." My calm, brazen replies would dog them so madly their faces turned red, as if they were going to faint. I fed off that. Maybe that's part of why I did it. An extra perk to get that rise out of people and rile them up. I figured if they were going to busy themselves with my business and annoy me in the process, then I'd annoy them right back.

This next school, Butch College Prep, apart from the mental abrasion of a much longer school day than any other school I spent time in, was no different. I liked the image of the place because it was a fancy prep school right smack-dab in downtown Chicago. The way I figured it, the big city offered itself up to me on a platter if—or, rather, *when*—I decided to ditch the

school, partially for the day or forever. I'd be lying if I said I wasn't excited about this one for the opportunities of image and circumstance it offered to me.

Chapter Two

The principal of Butch Prep, Mr. Anderson, was a hard-ass. He had a long, hooked nose and a large, bald head. The hunch-backed little man resembled a mythical troll and played the part well in real life. I came to find out later that he was known as *Mr. Bastardson*, especially among the rejects and incorrigible cases. He must have read my file because he streamlined me into that rag-tag category right away. He may even have known I grew up without a father, and perhaps found that fact especially invitational to shrink me down to size. Anderson was the sort of tyrannical patriarch who played the father in every social situation in life, like a god whose authoritative power, he believed, he giveth and can taketh away as he pleases.

Anderson had a bitter tone of voice, devoid of any hope or faith in the specific unfortunate youth who were failures in his eyes. He used that tone only with the rabble who always seemed to end up in his office. Making his rounds through the halls, he'd whip out that voice at a moment's notice while bantering with some teachers and playing the nice guy with the few students on his A list.

Take the morning of my first day at the school, for instance. I showed up for classes a few days after the school year started. Anderson was in the middle of a conversation asking Gunnar, apparently one of the school's ace football players, about how he "made that impossible pass from across the field" the night before. Seeing the admiring twinkle in Anderson's eye as he gushed at the jock quarterback, you'd think Mr. Anderson was a starry-eyed groupie. Then one of Anderson's incorrigible cases flashed before him in the middle of Gunnar's sentence.

"Slow down, Mr. Beasley!" Principal Anderson barked, darting his head around toward the teen perpetrator whose short sprint had been stopped in its tracks by Anderson's shout.

The assistant principal, Mrs. Grendel, was always at his side. She was his faithful toady, just as wretched as him in mode and manner, though not as talkative. She was like his silent enforcer. She always hid her face behind two parted slabs of silver grey hair that poofed out over the sides of her head. It was a wonder to me how the two escaped being turned to stone by sunlight. They were married—a perfect union, right? With their troll children, I imagined the family unit as they should be, living somewhere in the misty mountains of Norway.

For my part, the troll king barely acknowledged me, just cold stares, like the one he gave me when I walked past him toward my locker, soon after he derided the Beasley kid. I wondered if Mr. Bastardson's ill-humor was due to a strategy he had of keeping me on edge, or if he just didn't want to expend any energy on me because he figured I wouldn't be around in his school for long anyway, knowing my record of playing leap-frog with high schools around the city.

I crouched by my locker. I prefer the bottom column of lockers because it gives me some shelter and a sense of anonymity. I didn't need anything from my locker, of course; I just kept the door swung open, my hands inside as though I was shuffling for papers and appearing busy. I did this for what seemed an extraordinarily long time. When I get set on a task, sometimes it seems like, if I'm not careful, I can drone away at it forever. The only legitimate thing I did was place a spare dictionary inside, should anything happen to the pocket dictionary I carry around with me at all times. You can hardly have too many dictionaries.

I was still fake rustling in my locker when the digital bell rang ceremoniously, and the hall's occupants began shrinking into each of the classrooms with a volley of doors opening and closing in rapid, intermittent succession. I made my way to first period. Here we go, I thought.

I found the classroom and sidled my way to the back of the class. Not the very last seat in the back corner, since the farthest corners can still be pretty conspicuous, but just enough in the back area as to be the least noticeable. These were the old wooden classroom seats where the desk folds up by a hinge and lowers, like a lever, down on the right side. The teacher, a sunset-aged woman with tiny, snow-white curls that made a bed of buds in her hair, was standing facing the class in front of the digital blackboard where *Mrs. Karky* was scratched in hasty, all-caps lettering.

I looked up and down at the walls of the classroom, scoffing at the contrasts in this school: high-tech classroom gadgets, but no air conditioning and ancient wooden seating, and a longer school day, but so far nothing to justify it, as if anything could. The waxing excitement I'd felt began to wane. Unimpressed.

Old-fashioned-looking posters littered the wall and ceiling. The one that caught my eye first was colored red, white and black like those old Lucky Strike cigarette packs. Stamped across the top and bottom, in big letters, read BEWARE and SABOTAGE. The crimson circle in the middle profiled a screaming black cat in defensive position, its fur bristled jaggedly upright and its back arched into a pointed hump. I.W.W. and ONE BIG UNION were typed above and below the cat circle. Another poster pictured a hobo-looking man with a triangle-shaped head and wavy hair. A cigarette stub poked out of his mouth, and he held up a guitar like it was a trophy, showing off a message scrawled on the instrument in large marker-lettering, though it was surely paint, as I doubt they had plastic markers back then, which started at the guitar's belly and followed all along the side of the body to the bottom of the neck. It read, THIS MACHINE KILLS FASCISTS. Curious.

Other black-and-white photograph posters portrayed people I'd never heard of, most carrying odd or socially extinct names. The poster labeled *Eugene Debs* showed a bald man with small spectacles in a dapper suit and bowtie. He looked like a principal, and was waving his hands and shouting like one, but far from the Mr. Andersons of the world, this guy's passionate fury emitted an inexplicable light of dignity and respectability. I would have pegged the middle-aged woman pictured beside him as a schoolteacher, owing to her antique eyeglasses, the kind that lack the thin bars that hook over the back of people's ears, a white dress shirt and scarf, and dark hair pulled back in a bun. Except that the scandalous nature of this woman's photograph—two police mug-shots of her front and her profile angles spliced together, under the name *Emma Goldman*—convinced me otherwise.

Come to think of it, the photographs of all these classroom pin-ups were snapped in the heat of insolent finger-pointing or defiant gestures. Plastered behind the teacher's desk corner was one Ella Baker hollering into a 1950s grated microphone beside the photo of a grandmotherly woman known simply as Mother Jones, dressed all in fancy Victorian, like the Queen of England. What a strange place, I thought, like a museum of rag-tags.

My eyes lazily passed over a chattering Mrs. Karky and settled on a much younger woman seated at a table that extended from Mrs. Karky's desk. The silent young woman's eyes were locked on her lap as Mrs. Karky spoke, and my eyes were fastened squarely on this mystery woman because she seemed unfathomably familiar to me.

I was sure I knew this girl from somewhere. At first I couldn't place her. For a little while I thought that perhaps I was mixing her with the memory of someone else. As Karky continued fawning about the classical structure of American government in the impending curriculum this year, I watched the young girl sitting to the teacher's left. She looked almost as young as every other student in the classroom, except for something else. I reasoned like a detective, a game I enjoyed playing in my head, about what role she had in the class. Clearly she was some sort of an authority figure—a student teacher, I assumed—because she sat facing the class, next to the teacher's computer desk in the corner. She was also professionally dressed in a gray business skirt and sable, texture-knitted leggings. She had straight dark hair that fell to her shoulders and wore black, oval-framed glasses, but her nose—shaped celestially, upturning from the bridge to the tip, in a scooped, circular fashion—gnawed at my memory. Like a crescent moon, the dainty snout gave her the air of a petite beauty. And her jaw line, rounded nearly in a right angle, reminded me of fashion models often chosen for their pronounced bone structures. She was now gazing diagonally out the window, exposing the right profile side of her face, when I recognized her. My heart stopped. I knew who she was.

Clair Willarney. To me, she was the most popular girl in school—at my first high school, Lake Shore High. This was before I started going off on my own from school to school. Lake Shore High was my last memory of when I *followed the rules*. It's the place that reminded me where I'd be if I had stayed there: in college likely, along with the rest of the kids I went to elementary and middle schools with. A different life.

I was, instead, in limbo—exactly where I wanted to be. Still, I didn't like thinking about Lake Shore High or anyone who attended or taught at the school because, with them, came the possible judgments and scorn slung at me for *giving up* on school. All at once, Clair Willarney brought with her that heavy past tumbling down on me like rubble from a dump truck.

When I realized who she was, I began to sweat. Why? I thought. I was sure she didn't know me. We never, not even once, spoke. She never so much as looked at me. I figured she was just stuck up. In that way, she was just another face in the crowd that rushed past, like a current, in and out of the halls.

"All right, let's do attendance," Mrs. Karky said.

Picking up an iPad from her desk, the elderly instructor started rattling off names monotonously, usually answered by a voice in the elbow-to-elbow packed classroom. Every several names or so silence would ring out.

It wouldn't be long until the Js, where my name would come up. Did my mom talk with the authorities? I guess I'll find out, I thought.

"Aristotle," Mrs. Karky read, to a smattering of kids snickering in the audience.

My eyes shuttered, an inner rage boiled, as if a jury just handed down a guilty verdict. Then the sentencing came. She repeated the name, this time ringing it more like a question. "Aristotle?" No answer. The seconds that passed in silence echoed in my brain with every hammering tick of the clock. When she began flipping through recitations of other students' names, I could breathe again.

The bell rang, and the classroom audience, in one big rustling blob, rose and shuffled out as quickly as we all could move our feet. I felt comfortably enmeshed in the middle of it, anonymous and unreachable by anyone. I guess I'm done with this school, I thought. Once out in the hall, when the clamor instantly grew louder, I felt freed up. I considered maybe just skipping the rest of my classes today, if not ever at this school. Why bother? I thought.

"Hey, Telly," a voice called after me.

I knew immediately whose voice it was before I turned around. Clair stood just outside the class doorway. It felt like I was at the edge of a prison yard attempting to escape, and the giant spotlight from the guard tower popped onto me, stopping me in my tracks. All I could do was answer.

"Yeah."

"Do you have a minute?" she asked. "Could we talk?" Her brow was raised in an inviting, friendly way that I knew meant no harm or derision.

"Okay," I said. I looked around instinctively, as if the walls and lockers had eyes.

"Let's walk a bit," Clair said quickly, registering my hesitation. "Where is your next class?"

"I'm not exactly sure," I said, spinning my backpack around on one arm and pulling out a crinkled class schedule given to me by the front office. I held the paper in front of me; she leaned over, scanned down the sheet with her forefinger and found the listing for second period.

"Your next class is in building two," she concluded. "It's not far. Come on."

A momentary silence set in as I put the schedule away and repositioned my backpack, my hands clasped mid-chest around the straps as I walked. Students were rushing past us, left and right. Neither of us spoke until we left the building and got into the open air, a few minutes' walk from the next building housing my next class. I figured I might be compelled to say something, some obligatory nicety about the school or chitchat about the weather, though I probably would have stayed silent had she not spoken first.

"So you really don't care for your full name, do you?"

I shook my head no. "I didn't choose it; I don't like it; I don't have to use it."

"Fair enough."

Her response seemed understanding and genuine. She wasn't grilling me like a police officer, as everyone else tended to do when frustration or dismissive attitudes replaced their inability to understand my simple and absolute dislike for a name that was not mine.

"And you would've gone every day as absent?"

"Yeah."

"I didn't know you were in the class when Mrs. Karky called your name," said Clair. "I immediately looked up and found you sitting in the back. Your face was stone cold. I knew better than to call you out." She laughed to herself.

I turned my head to her, wondering what amused her, though my look wasn't a defensive inquiry. For some reason, by then I was growing comfortable with her and opening up.

"Oh, come on," she responded to my bemusement. "You're surprised I know better? I can imagine what you might have done had that name been sounded and directed at you."

I was silent, still not knowing what she was getting at.

"Hurling a desk across the room the last time your name was publicly outed tends to stick in memory," she said.

"You remember that? You knew it was me?"

"Telly," Clair pointed out with disbelief, "the whole school knew about it. At least, they knew about you chucking that desk, storming out of class, and then disappearing the next day, never to return. I wasn't there in the classroom, and I knew about it."

I smirked, and then went stoic again, thinking on the reason I threw the desk that day. "Fuck that school and fuck all of them."

"Hey," she stopped me just before we got to the next building and stepped in front of me attentively. "If I arrange it so *Telly* appears on the attendance sheet, will you keep coming to class?"

I searched her eyes for the slightest ounce of pity that I would use to reject her offer. She just stared back, scanning my eyes from left to right, then shrugging her eyebrows, urging my answer.

"What do you say?" she asked.

"Sure," I said. "Okay." A cool composure came over me, and I suddenly felt sincere gratitude for what appeared to be a small but selfless act of kindness. "Thanks."

"Of course," she said, reaching out and softly pressing one of my shoulders. She began to walk the way we came, turning back to say, "Your next class will be on the first floor in there, on the left."

I nodded. She smiled cordially and nodded back as she continued, then walking fast to get back in time for the next period. I watched her elegant stride. I remembered the way she walked from seeing her at our old school, but she had grown adult-like. Professional. Older. The feeling was intimidating, another reminder about what stage of adulthood others would say I'd be at had I not decided to hold onto this stunted high school world.

For the first time that I could remember, I had school to look forward to.

Chapter Three

The next day the first period bell rang when I was still in the cafeteria nursing a second cardboard pocket-box of milk. By now the taste was nearly warm due to the aimless daydreaming I'm accustomed to. Clair has gotten taller, I thought. I wondered what her college experience was like, and how it felt to now work in a high school. Next realizing Clair's first period class was what I was late for, I downed the remaining gulps and strode quickly to the room.

When I entered, Clair was in the middle of the attendance sermon. Her call-and-response style was way more lively than her elderly counterpart, who, now that I thought of it, wasn't in the room. Clair glanced at me as I walked in, and I noticed the faintest half-smile begin to lift on one side of her face. I wondered if it would be even perceptible by anyone else. I usually would sooner skip class than be late and be open game for everyone's stares, but I took my seat with a more than usually affected obliviousness of people's regard.

"Telly Jorgenson," Clair called, glancing again at me, lifting another half-hidden smile.

"Here," I said, faintly grinning back.

By the end of class the old lady still hadn't arrived, but Clair was at home in the teacher's desk, writing busily as the crowd left her room and the air shifted quieter.

The last one in the crowd to leave, I walked to the door. It occurred to me to ask where Mrs. Karky was—an excuse to begin some chitchat. I turned around to speak, and Clair was facing me, a few inches from my face. She obviously had been following me out the door because she stopped, mid-step. Instead of flinching and stepping back—and maybe laughing off the mix-up with "oops" or something—she just stood there, peering into my eyes.

I don't know how long we stood locking eye contact. Five long seconds? Yeah, that's right. It felt like an hour. Our gaze seemed like a taut rope during a tug-of-war, where each side is pulling so hard that both teams are at a powerful standstill.

We both blinked out of it. I stepped out of the doorway and into the hall, giving her room to exit.

"Have a good day."

"You, too."

We each glanced at the floor and back at each other, the social ritual that expresses a comfortable distance between two people going our separate ways. She turned to leave, clutching her books and lesson planners. I turned the opposite direction, my hands at the sides of my chest with thumbs hooked into the straps of my backpack. The world seemed to spin as I walked down the hall toward my next class, daring not to look back to see if she was watching me.

That night, tough questions began to cut like razors through my brain. Was she waiting for me to make a move—kiss her right then and there in the doorway, amidst the day's clatter behind us, school in session? No, I argued to myself. That would have been a nonstarter. What then? There was something there, I was certain of it.

I lay in bed begging for sleep to come give me some renewal from the strange worriment wrapped around me like my blanket and sheets. I was sweating hot. I kicked the coverings all off so that I lay bare-chested, in my boxer shorts, wondering how long I'd endure the cold of

departing summer before I'd have to wrap myself up again. At least long enough to shift from associating these blankets with that rattling anxiety of Clair flashing across my mind over and over. She knew who I was and how long I've been in school. To everyone else I was at a safe distance, but to her it was like she knew my secret. I couldn't hide anymore.

The bizarre thing was, I didn't want to hide from her. Clair finding me out could've given me the opportunity to move on and choose another school. I'd left other schools for much less. I didn't know why I hadn't the nerve or interest to run away. All I knew was, I wanted to see her again—just her and me.

If I got to school early enough, I figured, I would catch her when she arrived. Or I could stay late and catch her on the way out of school. The last option was to repeat today's encounter, after first period. I decided to go for all of them and see which one, or more, presented some alone time for Clair and me, however fleeting it might be. Okay, I thought, I'll do that. I have to.

Now how could I fall asleep? I asked myself. And then it hit me. Masturbation—my cheerful inner passenger—had always been, as far back as I had discovered the pleasant pastime in sixth grade, an unending sedative. Many a night like this, when my head weighed with worries, I only had to begin softly kneading that burrowed area at the base of my penis, and the world dissolved. The next thing I knew I'd always waken, rested and relieved. That night was no different. Prepared, I kept my socks within arm's reach when the time came for their custodial use during such endeavors, lest I sully my sheets. I was ready. My hands slipped into my boxers as gracefully as a whistling chef could enter a kitchen to work some sizzling magic with wet, raw vegetables.

My hands were in their own warm kitchen. One hand held my flaccid love organ; the other caressed the base of the trunk. This graceful hand-duet moved in unison, pressing firmly, rubbing circularly back and forth, at their instruments. Stimulated, my mind redrew Clair's image—a close-up view on her face, gazing into my eyes from under her brow, raising a slight smile. We were not in the classroom.

She was here, on my bed, riding me. Her pelvic bones ground into mine; her vagina-hair scratching against my own groin-patch was like two kittens nuzzling their heads together. The moonlight, illuminating through the window behind her, created a deep blue aura over her dark hair and bare shoulders. My fingers took fistfuls of her breasts like soft bread dough. In my head we were a mortar and pestle as our groins rubbed and rolled faster and more forcefully. After we climaxed she collapsed on me, both her hands gripping and releasing my shoulders. Our chests heaved into each other. Our hearts were boxing in their cages.

I opened my eyes, took a long breath, let it out. I withdrew the sock, now soggy at the bottom, from underneath my covers and tossed it onto the floor, the faithful conduit of my imagined late-night adventure. Looking back, I'm sure I fell asleep with that gratified smile spread across my face. Everything—the air, my sheets, the silent moonlight—felt warmly gorgeous and grand. A sweet, comfortable tomorrow seemed to swim toward me.

Chapter Four

It wasn't difficult to wake myself early. Even though it was still dark outside, I shot right up from bed, rested enough. And even though my perceived passage through the last several hours asleep was instantaneous, I felt I'd been waiting too long for the morning to come, when I'd meet Clair on my terms. My night's dreams were still in memory then; all I remember now was that those dreams felt protracted and time-consuming.

I got to school so early the main gate was still padlocked. Impatience didn't vex me, however. The feeling of being early comforted me. It felt like I was ahead of the game. I won't miss my chance, I thought.

For a while I kept company by striding only on the crevices that mark each concrete slab in the sidewalk, one step at a time, all the way down the end of the block, then walking back to the main gate by running my fingers over the grated surface of wrought-iron bars, playing them like a broken-down, dead xylophone. At last I rested my backpack on the pavement and leaned my back against the fence. The air still had a brisk nip to it, but by then, saffron beams streaked from their eastern origin and fanned out across a pastel lilac sky. My eyes closed. I could feel the slightly rising warmth mixing over the chill air.

Thudding footsteps opened my eyes and turned my head. A custodian I had seen a few times already the day before came walking up. His step and demeanor were cheerful. He had on bright amber leatherwork boots, the kind construction workers wear. The slightly untied shoelaces bunched up above the tongue. His bleached jeans were scuffed with wear and splotches of paint, pitch, dirt, and grime. It seemed he could work twelve hours a day without a complaint.

Glancing at me, he said, "You're up early. Wanted to hit those books fresh?" He took a large, jingly wad of keys from inside the long middle-pocket of his brown hoodie.

"Yeah," I said, chuckling nervously.

After gracefully sliding the key into the lock, which released the bolt and chain, his rough, dry, and callused hands began to pull the long chain out, creating a loud whirring rattle. Those two or three moments, where the only sound in the world I heard was the chain and the steady fence grinding against each other, I knew that was my day's soundtrack. It seemed to sink into my brain and prepare me for what fate lay ahead, through those gates about to swing wide.

"Thanks a lot," I said.

"Have a good day," he replied. "Study hard." He staked the gate poles into their ground holes.

I walked around the track and football fields while I waited for the building doors to open. Maybe it was just the fertilizer, but the smell of freshly mown grass is stimulating. I've gotten some of my best ideas, overcome some of my biggest problems, from the act of walking. Bike-riding, too. I'm certain it prompts a creative atmosphere in the mind that frees you up from daily obstructions and social routines. I bet that's why some people frequent yoga or meditation circles. I don't mean to sound like a philosopher, but between that and sitting on the toilet, there's no other place like it in life for a soul to breathe and develop.

No one but the odd worker or solitary teacher occupied the buildings and grounds when I started to make my way to my first-period classroom. The room was dark, the door locked, when I arrived.

I decided to walk down the hall to the bathroom, whose doorway was blocked by a grey pushcart stacked with bright yellow buckets and containers, broom and mop sticks jutting out of the top. I'd thought to go to the bathroom in the next building, but something odd caught my eye. To the right of where I stood in the enclosed walkway entrance to the bathroom, in a blind spot in the corner, a door to a small room was cracked open, revealing a framed photo of a smiling little girl. The room was too small to be a classroom, too big to be a custodial closet. To the side of the doorway was a blue placard with large white lettering—B233. Underneath was a label—Custodial Room.

I didn't want to appear to be snooping so I waited next to the cart, as though waiting for the restroom to open after the janitor inside was done, and subtly peered into the room. It was the size of a one-person bathroom. Thick, white stone walls and bright white light provided a sterile backdrop. Populating the room were a grimy grey carpet, a large dumpster on wheels, a vacuum cleaner, and a black corrugated plastic hose hanging like a large vine from the ceiling. There were four white shelves that spanned the room's entire back wall. The top shelf was mostly empty, and the bottom two shelves were rowed with dirty cleaning materials—ammonia, a mop head, an array of spray cans and squeeze bottles.

But the third shelf, at eye level, was decked and adorned with trinkets that were unmistakably emotional, indicating an absent resident. I counted fifteen photos in all, a fourth of which were framed. Some photos were taped to the shelf's back wall. Little boys and girls. Several of the photos showed recurring faces in different scenes. One was a lovebird couple in their twenties, pajama-clad, lying on their stomachs and posing for the camera with their heads resting on crooked elbows. The custodian who opened the gate for me appeared in a couple of the framed shots, arm-in-arm with a woman his age. They posed proudly in front of a seascape that clearly was Lake Michigan.

The sight of it addled me. I kept looking around for some explanation or familiarity but found none. The scene was peculiar. The person who created this arrangement, undoubtedly the friendly custodian who just opened the gate for me, took great care to put it together, and likely did it over time.

I didn't know why but the sight filled me with gloom. This was the custodian's office? I thought of the many principals' offices I'd spent time in—big, vibrant green plants, bowls of forbidden chocolates, hard wood desktop and computer, windows that let the daylight in. The only similarity between the two kinds of offices was the family photos.

How could he be happy in a situation like this? I didn't understand.

I went back to the dark classroom, sat cross-legged next to the door, pulled out *A Wrinkle in Time*, and began reading where I'd left off a couple days earlier, before school interrupted. I'd lately got on a kick of tracking down and re-reading all the stories that remained fondly latent. *The Lion, The Witch and the Wardrobe, The Giver, Hatchet, The Boxcar Children, Z for Zachariah*, I swallowed all of them whole again. Shrink psychologists would probably say I was trying to recapture my childhood, dwelling on the past, preventing myself from developing and moving forward in life. But what the fuck do they know?

"Telly," a voice said, sounding cheerfully surprised. Clair approached beaming, carrying a stack of books and folders under one arm, her purse slung over the other. She stopped and pulled out a clanking roll of keys from her purse. "What are you doing here so early?"

I shrugged. "Didn't have anything else to do and couldn't sleep." Half of that was a lie.

"Well, come on in." She stuck a big key in and, with the same hand, turned the knob and pushed the heavy door open, then stuck her foot at the bottom as a stopper and flipped the two light switches on. She did all this in a rapid succession that I found intensely attractive. I wanted to comment on the coolness of her action but held my tongue and just followed her in, taking my seat near the back. All the while Mrs. Karky was nowhere to be seen.

"So where is Mrs. Karky?" I asked.

"She has some sort of flu bug or something."

"I hope it's nothing serious," I said, though actually I didn't care, as Mrs. Karky's absence was a godsend; her presence would only be an interruption. But expressing some concern seemed the socially expected thing to do.

Some suspenseful moments of silence passed. I'd pulled out my book, and she appeared to mull over lesson planning.

"You know, I looked at your file. I hope you don't mind."

Clair finally broke the silence. I shrugged and nodded, showing less than the least bit of opinion.

"You have F marks up and down your school history," she said, "but whenever the schools have managed to sit you down and test you, your results are off the charts."

"I didn't know I was being tested in that way. If I had I would've told them to go fuck themselves."

"Telly, my point is, you could do anything—attend any college you want, for free. What are you still doing in high school?"

"I might ask the same question to you," I shot back, sportingly. "What are you doing back in high school, so soon after you left?" I answered my own question: "Maybe we're both looking for something."

There was a prolonged pause. She gazed at me, blinking periodically, sunk in thought, or speechless and at a loss for what to say.

"Fair enough," she said.

The rest of the class started filing in, and the room noise grew with scattered rustling and chatter.

For a student teacher to be unexpectedly thrown, overnight, into the sole classroom teacher role instead of studious observer was enough to shake anyone into bumbling awkwardness. But Clair wasn't intimidated. She dove into the difficulty and breathed easily in it like a fish in water.

Until now, the class had been indifferent to her, except, of course, for how young she appeared, as though she was in high school herself.

Clair went through the motions of taking attendance, and informed everyone that she'd be taking over the class fully while Mrs. Karky was out sick. Then she paused, mid-motion, in hesitation.

"So this week we're supposed to cover the American Revolution, the founding and development of the fledgling government," she began in a disclaimer tone of voice. Something told me we weren't going to actually learn about it, not in the way we'd expect from Mrs. Karky,

anyway. "But I want to take the opportunity to encourage a critical eye to discern between image and reality. Look at the fabric of some of your clothes." She looked around the class. Some students, not many, started looking themselves over, inspecting up and down the surface of their clothes. "If you don't look closely, you just see color. I want to encourage you to see and feel texture as well. That's the way to look at history."

Clair continued by dimming the lights and showing the class a portrait I remember seeing before, in elementary school—an oil painting of the Constitutional Convention from 1787, where the founding fathers are decked out in powdered wigs and multi-colored tights and jackets. These men were pretty ridiculous, I always thought.

"Look at them," she urged. "The way they're posing, they look like sorority girls, don't they?" This remark created a soft ripple of chuckles. The class was waking up. "They're standing daintily, their chins held high, with arched backs, and several of them have one arm each cocked triumphantly at the side. These are the sorts of things to look at when doing visual analysis, to tell you what the scene is about, what the painter has intended in the frame, and who the audience is."

She clicked the projector, bringing up the next slide full of colorful, recognizable graphics detailing several kinds of alcohol—whiskey, beer, wine, hard cider, alcoholic punch. If some in the class weren't paying attention before, everyone was listening and watching now, waiting to see what direction this lesson was headed.

Reading confidently from notes she had on the long table in front of her, she continued. "Now, this is the documented bill order list of the fifty-five delegates who partied just before signing the U.S. Constitution—one hundred fourteen bottles of various wines, thirty-four jugs of beer, eight jugs of whiskey, eight hard cider jugs, and seven bowls of alcoholic punch," she recited.

The classroom gasped, some whistled in affected disbelief, or let out muttered curse words to express their surprise and indicate how impressive the alcoholic feat was to them.

Clair switched back to the initial slide from the post-party Convention. "The amount of liquor these rabid alcoholics consumed on the eve of the Constitutional signing was *staggering*," she commented, with comedic emphasis. "So, would they have really looked like this? All primed and composed in a stately and regal manner?" She answered what everyone knew. "They would've been completely shitfaced."

The classroom erupted in barreling laughter that rumbled back and forth across the room. The hilarity was so catchy, you'd have thought everyone was drunk. Clair was laughing, too.

"They wouldn't have been able to open their eyes, not to speak of just being able to sit up, stand, or act with any coherent motor ability," Clair chimed in over the chuckles and guffaws crackling throughout the room.

After they quieted down, the class was rapt by Clair's every word.

"And this wasn't unusual," she continued. "The tavern, the neighborhood bar, was the primary public meeting place at this time, not the church or community hall. Imagine that—bars being central in daily life, not the church. A social movement advocating temperance in the masses wouldn't gain any traction for another fifty years, but would culminate in Prohibition in the 1920s, the prudish traces of which can still be felt today."

She moved about the class as she spoke, but periodically sat on the long table at the front. The way Clair sat on this table drove me dizzy—enough so that I had to focus to catch my breath. Maybe it was the self-assurance in her stance. The height of the tabletop rose just below her pelvis so, to sit on it comfortably, all she had to do was lean back on it with her arms. When

she crossed her legs, the slit in her skirt revealed a slice of skin from her thigh, which was marked by a firm thickness that indicated her athleticism as she demonstrated her intellectual prowess.

It was this position, arms outstretched behind her on the table, holding herself up as she engaged in dialogue with the class, which put the room in her hand—and put her longingly in my mind.

"I want you all to act like detectives sleuthing through history," she said. "Think critically about things that don't match up, things that create a veil between image and reality. Both can tell us something about what's going on in a given situation."

Seeing her that day, doing what seemed like she was born to do in that classroom, made my feelings about her grow deeper. I felt myself falling for her, slowly and steadily. Her intellect was an aphrodisiac to me. I don't know how else to explain it. I loved how she retained data, analyzed information, and boldly drew conclusions. Her academic ability increased my desire for her all the more.

Her drive pushed me to start considering what I could do with my own intellect. Perhaps go to college? For the first time I was actually considering that direction, daydreaming about the experience. But in the meantime, how could I use my wits to woo Clair? I knew she was drawn to me already, at least through a social interest, but I wanted to impress her further. I intended to keep going. I wanted to build on what inklings of a foundation that I sensed we had between us.

The only trouble was, she was my teacher and I her student. But I preferred not to think about that, or about all the impossible odds and obstacles stacked against a possible romance actually sparking between us. Goddamn, I was so much in my head it felt like I was jabbering on all day long when, in fact, I hadn't say a word after first period. A storm of conflicting thoughts gave no direction except the inevitable walk forward. She and I began something, and I intended to see it through to whatever developed.

Chapter Five

"Early again?" Clair called from down the hall. She was all smiles as she made the walk past the rows of classroom doors leading to ours.

I arose, pulling my backpack up and letting it sling over one shoulder. "I guess I'm just a good student now. Maybe I've turned over a new leaf." In my head, I wanted her to be the leaf and me the fig.

"Glad to hear it," she said.

We carried on this way for quite some time, a couple weeks, in fact. I'd meet her as she was arriving for class in the morning and we'd banter on about this and that. It was like our wake-up time, our special time between the two of us. I cherished and looked forward to those few minutes every morning before the bell, when it was just she and I. Each night before, while I lay waiting to fall asleep, I would think of things to converse with her about the next morning, things in my life, questions about hers. It was a special, if brief, space that wasn't fake or razor-guarded like every other human exchange during the day. Looking back, I realize she enriched my life. She was like my human diary, where I could reflect regularly on things that happened to me, and what I observed and thought about things in my life.

For instance, once I got mucus sprayed on me from someone's nose, and I told her my proverb inspired by the incident. "When the wind blows, spit carries" came to mind after I rode my bike one morning and got blasted by a geriatric cyclist. An older-aged man was riding ahead of me. After a red light we were close in tandem for a moment when his arm went up in front of his nose and mouth. I heard a faint whooshing sound, and an instant later my face was tinkled all over by a rolling mist. I'd known immediately what had happened. Although perturbed, I wasn't angered. How could I be? What would I have told him after speeding to his side? "Watch where you blow your spit, you old fart"? Clair was as shocked as I was by the snot story, but also amused by my lightness on the matter, and she empathized with my reluctance to resent the man and his accidental, drive-ahead spitting.

Together with Clair those mornings, I felt like I had a friend—a close, intimate friend. There was something unique in our rapport, which clearly neither one of us enjoyed quite the same in anyone else, whether teacher or student or administrator. But I also wanted something more. The desire to kiss her, to pounce all over her, was still rooted in the pit of my stomach. But as a couple of weeks passed, I learned to bury it, I suppose, like a treasure that I planned to return to and retrieve, though I didn't know when. And like a buried treasure, perhaps, I feared if I stayed away too long, I would forget where it was buried and spend endless hours digging up my insides searching for it again. I wanted her for more than a friend. I just didn't know how I could tell her or create a situation where the truth could unfold in some way that didn't wreck the special time we possessed on those mornings.

It was easy enough to fantasize over a badly desired turn of events. In that sense, Clair came into my bedroom every night and turned it into a sweat lodge. Waking up, however, and making the trek to school hammered regular reminders into me that, as great as things had

gotten—and as strangely successful a student as I'd become—there was still something closer lacking. Two opposite forces were pushing against each other. Something had to give.

Clair had become someone close—no, closest—to me during that period of my life. We were uniquely friends. But it wasn't that sex or romance didn't slip into our conversations. I didn't try to avoid the subject for propriety's sake. On the contrary, I made sure sexual topics came in. Subtly. Maybe it was my only hope to keep things on edge, lest our dynamic affinity get boxed into the *friends zone* or, worse, a teacher-student category. I was determined to break that predetermined mold.

There was the morning we discovered we were both Beatle maniacs. Our eyes both widened and we instantly began flicking back and forth, like Frisbees, our favorite songs, thoughts, and feelings about each Beatle, and the bits of mincemeat trivia stories behind their music and their personal lives that no one except the most obsessed fans care to know anything about, things that ordinary people don't notice or perhaps don't know they notice but are subconsciously affected by. We glowed over the fact that we both swoon from Paul's mesmeric base line in George's song, "Something."

"What about the song where John slips in a reference to oral sex?" I asked.

"What?" she exclaimed. "Bullshit." She tilted her head in a cocked smile, squinting her eyes at me suspiciously. Her incredulity was playful, as if I was trying to trick her or something.

"So quick to judge?" I shot back, just as playfully. "Are you going to hear me out first?"

"You're right," she conceded. "Go ahead. But I'm pretty sure I'm not going to believe it."

I sensed the challenge, composed myself by shifting in my seat and rising up from the back of the chair.

"Norwegian Wood," I said. "It's a John song—you know that." I checked in to make sure, not so much testing her Beatle knowledge as faithfully affirming it. She gave a volley of nods, indicating she, of course, knew who sang lead on that track, which, as anyone knows, typically the Beatle who sings on any given song is the one who principally wrote the tune. "By the end of the song, the last line, when it's at its highest intensity," I explained, "that wall of acoustic guitars and sitar crashing over the lyrics, if you listen closely, he says: 'Then, I licked her fire; isn't it good Norwegian Wood.'" Clair was enthralled hearing me cycle through my critical, investigative commentary on the matter, as if I was the lecturer now. She was actually listening to me—not something I was accustomed to, as much of a loner as I was.

"Huh," she murmured, clearly considering the possibility that I was right. "Interesting. I always just thought he said, 'lit a fire.'"

"Me, too," I said. "At first. But one day I heard it differently—listened to it again and again to confirm."

She was smiling then, amused at how passionate I was about the topic. She could tell I'd given it a lot of thought.

I kept going. "It makes sense, doesn't it? Given how much of a dog John was. He said in an interview I read one time—maybe the *Playboy* interviews he and Yoko gave just days before he was murdered—that Norwegian Wood was one of the songs where he could talk about, kind of like in code form, the sexual affairs he'd get up to behind his first wife's back."

"Right," Clair agreed, "the lyrics are innuendo of meeting someone anonymously and staying overnight."

"Yeah," I said. "Now, I don't want to be one of those conspiracy theory nuts who hear what they want to hear in song recordings. But there's a second syllable," I continued, "a double-

tap of the tongue that turns *lit* into *licked*. Makes it more fitting, the tongue-tapping to make the word, doesn't it?"

We were smiling deep into each other's eyes by then, nearly blushing, as we conversed in our own innuendo over the linguistic phonetics of vagina licking. This social fluency between us was enrapturing; it felt like something had to give soon. Growing a closer relationship with her, like I said, improved my life—and I venture to say it improved hers, too—but our camaraderie also seemed to raise the stakes of everything there was to lose, should a synergy fail between us. We'd move onto a new subject soon, surely. But I stretched it out as long as I could until students started their entrance.

Usually her need to prepare for the next period, and my mandate to get to my next classroom prevented us from continuing our intimate chats after class, though some days we managed to. We soaked up every minute—after all, there were so few—that we could get of our time together. One of those days we went out with the rushing crowd once the class ended. She had to run to the office, she said, to retrieve some paperwork; by coincidence, it happened that I'd been meaning to go by the office as well, also for paperwork. How sneaky it can be to utilize an errand you didn't want to go on to begin with.

Approaching the office doors from inside the main building, we were speculating about the psychological explanations behind John and Paul's unique creative songwriting duo when a burst of shouting halted us, mid-sentence.

"Put her out of here! I want her off school property. I'm calling the police," a furious voice wailed.

It was Principal Anderson, who was frantically jabbing a pointed arm in the direction of the door. In the small huddled crowd that seemed to be the center of conflict, the eye of the principal's rage was a sporty middle-aged woman, a clipboard in her hand. She was circling back away from and around Mr. Anderson, at once evading him yet inviting his increasing belligerence. The two were like boxers, circling each other, tension rising, before the fateful first blow would open the match. A security guard hovered like a hummingbird between the parties, fitfully going to one fighter and then the other, trying to calm the situation. Too late for that, I thought. Mrs. Grendel wasn't helping the situation, either, as the soft version of Mr. Anderson's bluster, goading the sporty woman on.

"Good," the boxer woman taunted, her raised hand holding the clipboard high above her head. "Call the police." She was fearlessly assertive. Surely Mr. Anderson wasn't used to anyone talking to him like that. "I'd love to show them this contract that allows me—a union delegate—access to this campus to meet with the staff."

"I understand that," said the security guard, a hulky woman with a walky-talky strapped to her belt. "Let's just go into the office and wait for them to arrive. This scene is disrupting the school schedule. With all respect, please." The guard's compassion won the union boxer over.

"Okay, that's fine," said the boxer delegate.

The huddled mass of people started to shrink into the office, tailed by Anderson who, just as he walked in, noticed the crowd of spectators that had gathered intending to watch the event until the end.

He scanned up and down the crowd. "What are you all looking at?" Anderson demanded. The principal's petulant tone of voice had a throaty, guttural sound, as though growing hoarse from laryngitis. "Go back to your classrooms." There was a terrible silence, like the moment before a stretched rubber band snaps in your hand. "Now!"

Clair spun around, facing the throng of students. "All right," she calmly said, her arms extended with open palms, and took one step in the direction she wanted us to go, like she was herding sheep. "Let's go."

Everyone scattered in separate directions after retreating from the scene. Without vocally deciding to do so, Clair and I walked back to her classroom. We said nothing the whole way. Clearly we were both in our own heads about the situation. Tension lingered in the air from the episode we just witnessed, like we were breathing adrenaline in gas form. Surprisingly, no one was in the classroom yet.

Clair closed the door ahead of me, turned the lock switch, and turned the thin bar that shut the blinds over the window, then swiftly spun around; she gracefully slip-stepped toward me, grabbed my head with both hands, and kissed my lips.

I closed my eyes right away when she came at me, surrendering to her initiative, but it took a moment to realize what was happening before puckering my own lips against hers. It was a long kiss; she pressed her lips firmly over mine; we alternated our mouth grips between flaccid and tight, suction and release. Oh my God, I thought to myself, we are making out. One of her arms was wrapped around my upper back and latched onto my opposite shoulder; the other arm held the back of my head—her fingers swirling in successive, circular motions through my curls as though she was lathering the area with shampoo. I thought her massage might push me into a trance as she continued to glide her tongue around the inside ring of my lips. Just then, as we feasted on each other's mouths like biting into soft peach fruit, I knew things would never be the same between us. How could the classroom walls hold us from now on? I didn't want to think about that, though. I wanted this moment to last without further plans or thoughts.

Chapter Six

I felt Clair's fingers clutching the two ridges that run down the nape of my neck, in between my ears, when she let go of our kiss. As we paused, standing apart, both of us lightly smacked our own lips as we stared at each other, moderating the wetness over our mouths with our tongues as if finishing a meal. We stood there, silent, softly blinking as we searched each other's eyes from left to right. Searched for what, I didn't know exactly. For my part, I was trying to register what just happened. It was what I had daydreamed and night-fantasized about, right? I reasoned. But then there it was, happening before me.

Neither of us spoke. At last, she turned around, undid the lock and opened the door enough to let in a faint barrage of hall sounds—people rushing back and forth, and a chorus of chatter. I took that as an opportunity, if not my cue, to leave. I stepped to the side of her and grabbed the door to open it wider so I could pass through, and felt her take my fingers in her hand. She gently squeezed and rubbed the web of my hand softly with her thumb. I considered it a triumph of will that I didn't look back as I walked away down the hall from her classroom. I could still feel the wetness from her mouth over my lips. It reminded me that what just happened was real. And now it changed everything, for better or for worse.

The day dragged on in my other classes. Butch Prep's extra-long school day worsened my confusion and quickened my excitement. Honestly I don't know why I didn't just outright ditch the rest of my classes altogether. I should have, propelled by the shock of the kiss and the furtive way Clair handled the situation, perhaps. I ate out of her hand so docilely I could've been a duck at an open-air zoo. I surprised even myself. That night my imagined sexual tryst with Clair seemed, for the first time, marked by expectation instead of fantasy. It was just a matter of time, I thought. We'll make it work. Somehow. It seems impossible but it's worth the secret and the risk. I just hoped she saw it the same way.

The next morning I didn't see her come down the hall. She bolted to the door and went in before I could gather my bag and papers. Inside, there was a calcifying silence between us. For an excruciating duration she didn't say anything. I certainly wasn't going to be the one to speak first. I was starting to brood at my seat, thinking maybe she got cold feet. Maybe she's scared—a coward if she is, I argued to myself. Or maybe she's just nervous about getting caught, and we just have to formulate a plan to develop our romance in secret.

As she sat at her desk pretending to look over lesson plans (her eyes were fixed, not moving side to side to read or scan over the papers in front of her), my attention turned to the area by the door where the kiss happened. Why do such beautiful things have to spoil in the end? I asked myself. Will I never feel her warm, wet, ecstatic lips on mine again? God, I'm such a bleeding heart, I thought. Get a grip.

"I saw Karky this morning," Clair said at last. She was grave, like she'd just come back from a funeral.

"Oh? How is she?"

"She's not sick at all. She never was."

"What? What do you mean?"

"It turns out she and other teacher union leaders from across the city have been laying the final stages of a work stoppage. The preparations started in the summer. But now the mayor has spurned their demands for good. They're going to strike. Starting tomorrow."

"Wait," I said. "What does that mean?"

"No school."

"Fuck." I took in the news, processing it. One question sparked. "Why are they telling you this now?"

"They wanted to make sure young teachers are on their side, and to tell them how the district has treated them."

"What did you say?" I asked.

"I said of course I'd support them." Clair seemed pained by her remark.

It's peculiar how a crisis of sorts can induce two people to put aside a crushing tension on both their minds. At the time, I thought that both of us were affecting concern about the strike situation. I certainly was pretending more alarm than I actually felt, and perhaps I was projecting my feelings onto Clair. In fact, as I soon learned, she was genuinely feeling extreme distress and worryment.

"What is it?" I said.

"The way the teachers have been treated," was her reply. "What the school district promised me to get me here meant taking pay and healthcare from older, more experienced teachers like Mrs. Karky once they finish training me. I feel so betrayed."

The lines on her forehead suddenly wrenched, and she began holding her head with one hand for support. A gleam appeared in her eyes. I got up from my seat, walked over to her desk, and stood resting my weight slightly on the long table in front of it. For a few moments I gazed down at her. I just wanted her to know that I was there. I extended my hand, but only my fingertips grazed the bumps of her knuckles as she withdrew her hand into her lap as defensively as a turtle.

"Telly," she said, nearly whispering. "Not that."

"What?" I said.

"Yesterday," she answered. "I can't do that. We can't do that."

"It was you who kissed me."

"I know. I'm sorry."

"Why are you apologizing?" I said, defensively. "It wasn't a mistake. It felt right." I gave her what I thought was a convincing line of reasoning. "We're basically the same age. You're only a couple years older. If I wasn't still in high school—"

"But you are," she insisted. "Plus," she added, "it's really not even that. It's just—" I dipped my head expecting her to finish her sentence, my eyes still locked on hers, "I've worked hard and I've worked a long time to get where I am, to make me who I am, to be right where I want to be—teaching. I do like you. But when the world settled back down for me last night, and I went back to my life, my routine, I knew that I can't have an extra pull on my life. I'm just not there for a romantic involvement at all, let alone with a student."

I leaned on the table watching her deliver her feelings, judging her. I'm a *pull*, I thought to myself.

She continued. "I woke up this morning feeling the same way I did when I fell asleep last night, so I knew I had to make things right again somehow." She paused, holding her breath. "I like you a lot. We're friends, aren't we?"

"Yes," I agreed. "We are."

Of course I didn't believe my reply, or at least I didn't want to. But those sorts of feelings Clair described, you can't reason with them. I didn't even want to try. I've bled my heart to death before over love—or what I thought was love. It got me nowhere. I barely climbed out of that grave alive. I knew better now. Wait, I told myself. She came to me in the first place. I resolved to hold my own and keep dignified.

My resolution was really all a front, though, a defense mechanism. I couldn't show just how vulnerable I was inside, that I had been falling for her, that I had dreamed about kissing her and somehow running off together, even if it was impossible to do so. I was ready; I had the courage. Why didn't she? I began to resent her unwillingness to meet me halfway toward a romantic relationship, though I hated feeling even an ounce of spite for her. In truth, I was still overwhelmed with a sense of admiration and a softness for her that was not dissipating.

If anything, my attraction to her was growing. It was growing into a more complex adaptive system, like I learned in Biology once a while back, before, of course, failing the class. I mused that she and I were microbes that have an electric connection, our personal rapport, specially formed to adapt to a changing environment, this bullshit school, our teacher-student situation, thereby increasing our survivability as a larger, adjoined structure. As long as our dynamic networks continued to interact—as long as I stuck around and didn't quit my commitment to her—our structure would be adaptive to both our individual and collective behavior mutating and self-organizing against whatever event or collection of events happened around us. This cosmic thought comforted me, gave me confidence at a sub-atomic level.

"Tell me more about your meeting with Karky," I said. Asking about this maybe made me the *better guy*, I guess, but I genuinely wanted to help her through her worryment, even if the effort was at least partly to distract me, and perhaps her, from the crushing blow she just laid on me, canceling our affair before it could even begin.

She smiled gratefully. I knew Clair appreciated the gesture.

"She knew about yesterday's outburst outside Mr. Anderson's office. The union person was trying to meet with the staff to inform them about waivers that Anderson had them sign, apparently this past spring, to implement the mayor's plan to lengthen the school day and other measures intended to stonewall the teachers' union. Turns out this school was a pilot project for all the new measures."

"Fuckin' Bastardson," I said, disgusted.

Clair didn't disagree or dissuade me from lambasting the principal. She nodded her head slightly, in gentle approval.

"I'm going to get some of the other younger teachers on board," she said, staring straight ahead as in a trance, completely certain of her forward course.

Clair appeared heroic to me just then. Can one fall in love just from a kiss? Because I was well in over my head by then.

All throughout class a sense of urgency buzzed in my brain. There would be no school tomorrow, and I had to keep our interaction going. I finally settled on slipping her a note. Juvenile, I know, but I was desperate. After thirty minutes of editing the content and running through several copies to get the pen strokes just right, the final copy read like this:

Clair,

This is my number. Use it when needed.

Friend?

~Telly

We shared a moment holding eye contact as I walked out of class with the crowd. Neither of us smiled, but, still, it was a comfortable, though fleeting, stare.

Then came the waiting game. How long it would last, I didn't know. Who knew how long the strike would last. How ironic—a fateful punishment on my truant ways, maybe—that the longer the strike went on and the longer I didn't hear from Clair, maybe not until school started back up again, the deeper the angst would pierce and prod my insides, like a well-meaning 19th-century surgeon.

So this is it? I thought. Our relationship is going to be as *friends*. That, granted, was better and closer than a fake student-teacher relationship. But I couldn't be satisfied with that. I had to try for more.

I wondered, could she really stay away from me? I don't want to seem arrogant but Clair clearly was as attracted to me as I was to her. To me, that should have been enough for us to grind out a spark between us, like a flint lighter. Our gaseous passion was flammable; it filled the room more the longer we were in each other's presence. And the longer we delayed and tension increased, from what I calculated, the greater the force of the ignition. It was simple physics. All it would take was a single spark. Her resistance prompted me to contain the extent of my own flame. I'd play off her next move.

Chapter Seven

My alarm phone rang in my ears with its awful, 1980s techno-music, which I'd always meant to change but never did. How do the tasks that take seconds to complete, and would prevent dozens of daily annoyances from mounting in mind, go avoided and unheeded for weeks, months? Another testament to my space-cadet laziness.

Another day of school and Clair were my first thoughts. Waking to this instant contrast of dread and gleeful anticipation I'd grown accustomed to in recent weeks. But not today, I soon realized. I sat up, swept my legs so my body lay bent over the side of my bed, my arms dead at my sides, awake, but with my eyelids draped shut to keep the light out until better adapted for the day.

I sighed, dolorous and bored. Yesterday's memory refreshed my mind about today's significance. The strike. No school. Going on Facebook confirmed the fact. Friends—acquaintances, or less than acquaintances, really, who I hadn't seen in what seemed like centuries and from schools long quitted and past—were posting up and down my newsfeed. I couldn't remember the last time I even looked through the long list of ever-reloading posts.

Suddenly a buzz followed by a swift flourish of bells pulled my attention to my phone now buried between my bed sheets.

"Hey it's Clair," the text read.

My eyes widened. The sound of my thumbs tapping at the glass resonated in the room, quieted by the still morning.

"Hey! What's up?"

"Do u knw abt rally @Clark & Adams?"

"No," I typed, "but I'd like to come support...can students even come to the rally?"

"Of course!" rang her immediate reply.

"Great!" I typed. "Cya there." That alone didn't satisfy me; another message seemed necessary. "Don't worry, I'll keep my distance ;)"—the winky-face emoticon meant to insert some sensuality into the situation.

She replied a simple, reassuring, smiley face. My world vibrated with thrilling excitement.

"Oh," she texted again, "and wear red."

On the L train downtown, I filed away her number in my phone, instinctively recording her in my contacts as "Clair!" To me, the receipt of any text from her was best, and only, suitable if marked by exclamation. In my train car, a couple groups of women around my mom's age were sitting and chatting jovially. They glanced out the window and back at each other throughout the conversation.

One of the women in an aisle seat rested her palm on what looked like a lawn sign, an oak stick with a large, white cardboard placard at the top. Her hand graced the top confidently like a regal staff, holding the sign face-out so the whole car could see it. The phrase ON STRIKE in bold black lettering took up the placard's entire middle section. The bottom section of the sign read FOR A FAIR CONTRACT. All the women wore red shirts, and most wore undershirts whose white collars peeked out. Half the women's red shirts read "Teachers Union—Local 1." The other half's red shirts showcased Chicago's white and blue-barred, starry-red flag in the

center. Though I knew the street corner where the rally was scheduled to begin, I decided I'd follow them in order to blend into a crowd.

Following the red-shirted crowd off the car and descending the flight of stairs to the street, it oddly felt like, I imagine, hitting ground in a hot-air balloon that had dreamily floated through the clouds for so long. The middle-aged mothers were still bantering cheerfully all the way down and onto the street while they turned onto the sidewalk without hesitating, knowing exactly their destination. As the drowning roar of the departing train vanished, the women headed in the direction of what sounded like a block party.

A tremendous chant of voices, preceded by deep, echoing drumbeats in the distance, punctuated the street noise around us, rising even above the honks, rushing cars, and scattered pedestrian conversation. It took another block of walking toward the chorus before I could tell what they were saying, all in a militant cadence.

"The teachers united will never be divided!"

My step quickened to turn the corner onto Clark from Monroe—just as the train-car crowd was doing the same—to see what these striking chanters looked like.

Clark Street was no more. Now at the city's bottom, in between the downtown buildings, moved a gigantic, wavering and breathing sea of red marchers. Half the mouths of the moving monster chanted the united teachers' slogan, the other half cheered and whistled, their fists beating the air. They even had a roving percussion band, whose members' drum kits were strapped to their shoulders as they strode in a patch to themselves across the broad belly of the beast. Their caramel-colored cymbals glittered in the sunlight, and each time I tried to focus on them closely, they crashed and whirred as if to ward off my stares. The crackling snare drums burst and popped like they had confetti inside, the fleet sounds pinballed between the buildings on either side. The base drums exploded like volleys of cannon fire, their sound waves pulsating through my chest and shaking the ground at my feet. The drummers and the raucous marchers fueled each other to create a glowing synergy over the whole march.

My back pants pocket vibrated.

"R u here?" Clair texted.

"Yup! Just got to Clark/Monroe."

"Cool. Enjoy. Thx 4 coming. Maybe I'll see you."

"Haha. Ya, maybe. Idk how tho. This march is monstrous!" I'm often more expressive in text than I am in person.

Although I was wearing red and was now walking in the thick of the ten thousand-headed beast—indeed, I was one of the beast's heads—I didn't feel part of it. I observed everything as an outsider. This was certain to me due to how many times I used *they* to myself when describing these surroundings in my head. In such situations where visual or social stimuli erupt all around me, I often play this game with myself of rapidly narrating everything I see, like a detective dissecting for clues to solve a particular problem. For me, this process reduces levels of confusion and anxiety that these situations tend to cause me.

Everything I observed filled me with wonder and admiration for these teachers—Clair now among them—who managed to pull off this magnificent spectacle. Across every street the march passed, praise won over all those delayed from going on their way—men and women in suits, cabbies and other drivers stopped in traffic, even police officers stood at the sidelines with a proud bashfulness on their faces as they watched the march, never for a moment considering to dare try and stop it. Except for, perhaps, Principal Anderson and his ilk, the teachers had not an enemy in the city.

One kind of person was absent from the gamut, however. My mind jumped back to the cheery, talkative custodian who opened the gate for me that morning when I began my meet-ups with Clair. What about him and the others who mop the floors, empty the wastebaskets, and really allow the school to function? They're like the housewives of Butch Prep. It'd be a pigsty without them. Where were they in the teachers' party? Maybe they're so barely noticeable that I didn't even see them in the crowd. Or not. The thought filled me with an empty sadness at the verge of disappointment. The teachers seemed fallible.

Suddenly something jolted past me, pushing my shoulder forward and startling my pace. Turning to my side, I saw Clair, calm and composed except for a mischievous grin. She wore a teacher's union shirt and the same black linen business skirt she wore to class. Her usual low-heel dress shoes or sandals were replaced with tennis shoes. I tried to play off coolly this sly act of playful attention toward me by throwing my chin upward slightly as a greeting, giving her my own subtle smile. That was the extent of our physical interaction.

We walked beside each other for a while when a catchy new chant emerged far behind us and whisked through the crowd like an electric current.

"Our education's under attack, what do we do? Fight back!"

Clair started chanting it first. I'd never heard her yell so furiously. The sound, coming from her, thrilled my ears. At first I was content admiring her rhythm and shrill voice. When I started chanting, it was more to myself, low-volume and unconfident. But resolve soon grew into my voice so that I could raise it distinctly among the chorus around me.

I belted out the words. For someone such as myself, accustomed to rarely raising my voice much at all and willfully locked inside my own head most times, gazing outward, to shout in public, in concert with others, was strangely exhilarating. One person shouting like this on the street would be labeled mad and ignored, at least until a police officer spirited him away to an asylum for *disturbing the peace*. But here, just like, I suppose, at boisterous sporting events, shouting primordially is socially acceptable.

We were caught up in the joy of it. We shifted periodically from making eye contact as we shouted the words, to glancing to our sides into other people's eyes as they shouted, to fixating ahead, our chins raised, taking in the power the massive crowd had created together. It all felt invigorating. As we marched around and around the downtown loop where all the trains circulated before spinning off into every direction throughout the city, it felt like nothing could hurt or stop us.

At last, the march halted in front of the city's public school headquarters for a rally. "Clair!" lit up my screen as having sent a text message. Instantly I looked at her. She was pumping the air with her fist and hollering relentlessly with the rest of the crowd. She must have just sent it furtively.

Her text read, "Hey! U wanna get outta here? Basically over now..."

"Ya sure. Where?" My thumb hit sent *Send*, and I stared at her to watch the effects of this sneaky text-jousting match.

In a few seconds she stopped fist pumping and grabbed her phone out of her pocket, looked at the screen, then turned in my direction until she found me. She answered with a smile, nodded, and started to shimmy her way through the crowd until she disappeared.

"Butch Prep," her next text, a few minutes later, read. "East side door of bldg 1—back gate is latched but unlocked." How precise, I thought. "But wait 10 mins," she added.

To tell you the truth, inside my head, I hoped she'd take me and fuck me inside a custodial closet somewhere. That's not an unusual thought that passes through my head daily. I'm

inclined to spontaneous, sexually fantastical soliloquies, even if they're not as involved or imaginative as they are when I'm in my bed slipping asleep. But we wouldn't be doing it at school. I talked myself out of that thought being at all connected with reality. At best, maybe we would make out again. Or we would just hang out together, as friends, if she continued by the new code which she erected between us, and which I ostensibly agreed to.

Although still light outside, the buildings and classrooms at Butch Prep were all dark and dim. The air was hushed. She met me at the building door, and we walked silently down the hall, rolling on our heels. My heart raced.

"What about the custodians?" I whispered.

"No one's here; everyone's gone."

"No." I redirected. "Why weren't the custodians out there today? In the street. I didn't see any. Aren't the teachers partnered with them, too?"

"I don't know."

She was as curious as I, and perhaps as crestfallen. I was flush with excitement to see the teachers' street party, but now they seemed imperfect, if they were just thinking of themselves and not the people who open the gates for them every morning and pick up their trash. I wanted to share these reservations with Clair, but decided to let the subject go for now.

She quietly but quickly opened the door to her classroom, and I stepped inside, after her. Clair held the doorknob from behind her back and closed the door by leaning backward. This time she didn't flip the lock or shutter the blinds. Perhaps such extra levels of precaution are redundant inside the walls of an already locked, dark and quiet building.

Watching her lean up against the door with her hands casually behind her back brought a ringing in my ears. At that moment I strode a long step toward her, almost knocking her over, but grabbing onto her waist as my whole body eased against hers. Her hands whipped around the back of my head tightly. She breathed through her nose deeply as her lips fastened onto mine. My eyes were clenched as my lips gripped hers. I opened my eyes as a thought occurred to me.

"Why here?" I asked, pleading. "I feel inhibited, like I can't concentrate for fear of being seen or something. Why can't we just go to your place?"

We were whispering heavily to each other, in between each of our sighs wafting lightly in each other's faces. We breathed so deeply we were almost panting.

"The same reason we can't go to yours," she responded. "I live with my parents."

Surprised at her answer, I broke away from her face to look into her eyes to see if she was kidding or mocking me. She gazed at me for a moment, scanning her eyes all over my face—at my eyes, the top of my head, my ears and eyebrows, down to my lips, before taking my hand and leading me to the long table at the front of the classroom. She propped up against the edge—half standing, half sitting—like she does when she's lecturing to the class, and pulled me to her.

We were making out again, our midsections touching through our clothes. I was hesitant to change the procedure because, until now, kissing and fondling each other was the extent of our exchanges. I wanted to shift to something else, but we were in a classroom—what else could we do? There was some fumbling on my part that didn't feel sexy. I was losing rhythm. I had to catch my breath.

A sharp whack suddenly echoed through the room, and I felt half my ass sting. The blow almost took the wind out of me; the shock felt like it made my eyes protrude out of my head.

Clair had slapped me. We were still kissing, but the slap broke my concentration.

"Is that okay?" she said, gently resting her forehead at the top of mine while looking me in the eyes from underneath her brow.

My chest heaved as I contemplated her question. "I don't know," I said. My ass prickled all over from the sensation, but I couldn't answer her question honestly without another chance to observe the phenomenon more closely. "Do it again," I urged.

Another slap, this time on the other half of my ass. The force rocked my body onto hers slightly. I caught myself by outstretching both hands on the table

"Again," I said.

This time she used both hands at once by first raising them in the air, as if she was conjuring thunder from the sky, and whipped them both down on me from behind. My body jostled from the motion.

A cold sweat shot through me. Maybe it was the spanking that made me want a thousand times more of her. And then I just went for it. Kissing down her neck, following onto the top of her chest bared by her shirt, then proceeding down between her breasts and stomach—I kept going—the whole time kissing again and again over her clothes right down to her crotch.

This is where I stopped. Something had come over me. I looked up at her. She had been following my every move, my every kiss. Pleasure was written in her eyes, which gazed down at me expectantly. I proceeded, just as though both of us had decided to jump off a cliff into water, adrenaline rushed through my veins like an avalanche. Both hands, each ascending her thighs and pushing up her skirt eventually reached their destination.

I pulled down her soft, blue-striped panties, held open the flap of her skirt and raised it over my head, like I was shielding from the sun at the height of noonday summer, while my forearms and fingers hooked over the tops of her thighs to keep my balance. I was on my knees now, and I breathed that sweet, pungent smell of moist genitalia fanning toward me. Thank God I developed a liking for that sweet, glandular smell when, now and again, I press my own fingers around and under my scrotum as one of those calming, solitary habits that are mine alone.

My head was underneath her skirt completely, and everything went dark. My hands lowered and caught a grip around her calves, which were tense now, and periodically flexing their bulbous muscles from hard to soft, as if they were breathing deeply. I was kissing the inside of each of her thighs, pretending the act was a litany, and that the sides of her thighs were sacred cave walls that I was granted the humility to enter into. Feeling toward the hallowed center to which these walls were leading me, I understood how insects use their antennas, instead of eyes, to see. This tongue, my trusted antennae, was helping find my way steadily until I pressed up against a wet and woolly, squishy planetary substance. A patched wall of sensation hit my taste senses all at once. I gagged, but she didn't hear or see me, thankfully. I didn't choke up in bad way. It was more like tasting grapefruit for the first time, or a juicy blood orange. There's a sensation with any new taste—especially a bitter one like this—that sends shockwaves all through your mouth. This was no different. My taste buds were just adapting to their new environment, that was all.

Being raised by women, including older sisters, I know by overhearing some of their more sexually philosophical conversations how great women's vaginas are supposed to taste. I could tell how hard Clair was gripping the table from the squeaks and humming sounds made from her thumb and palm rubbing against the surface. Not hard enough, I gathered, because she swiftly brought her hand down on my head and took a fistful of my curls as I traced over the contour folds of her outer and inner labia's borderlands. The sharpness of my hair being pulled was enough to press my tongue deep into her, burrowing it into the soft flesh of her womb—

pushing inward and withdrawing again and again, circling, then reversing back through all the motions. Another zesty sensation engulfed my taste buds and reverberated through my tongue and tingled all the way to the bottom of my throat.

Once I found her clit, like an oversized pea, I started focusing on that. Sucking and bobbing the circular ridge with my tongue prompted her to begin rhythmically tightening and releasing her grip on my hair. My hands, one by one, found their way to her breasts, first over her shirt, and then from underneath over her bra. Meanwhile, responding to her moans increased the pace and vigor of my delivery. My mouth muscles, particularly underneath my tongue, began to strain and fail. But resting my tongue on my teeth eased the burden on my muscles, and I started using my jaw as the new driving force, until I couldn't go any longer. I wiped some residual dribble from my glistening mouth as I rose to my feet. I reached deep into her mouth with my tongue, still recovering from its muscle fatigue.

"I don't have a condom but I want to fuck you," said Clair, her voice half broken by a whisper. She was still breathing heavily and still raging in heat as I was.

"When?" I whispered.

"Tomorrow. After the rally."

She clasped her hand over my middle and forefinger, and gently lowered them down inside her skirt to her vagina. She raised her eyebrows and faintly grinned, in a gesture that asked if I would finger her. I nodded graciously and started to feel around for her opening. But first I wanted to twiddle her clit and wet my fingers again over her moistened labia.

"There's another one?" I asked in an inquisitive and serious tone, aware of the irony of my question since her attention was divided, now severely, as I pressed and twirled around the distinguished clitoral circumference.

"Every day—" She took a couple of breaths. "This week—" Her eyes shut lightly. "There's actions—" She raced to catch her breath but couldn't. "All over the city."

My two fingers now extended inside her as far as their reach allowed. She whimpered with pleasure. My fingers' thrust strokes began as steady as a heart beat that, just as steadily, increased until their rapidity was being driven by my whole hand, then my whole arm. Sleek and slippery sounds emanated from the frictional area as Clair's torso convulsed into a burning climax. Her eyes were puckered tight, our foreheads were touching, we wavered together at an inexplicable height before reduced speed quieted us.

Meanwhile, with the same ease that she opened the classroom door, her hands had unbuckled and slipped into my pants. One hand caressed my enlarged but still flaccid appendage, which, throughout the whole episode, had been vacillating from a hardened to a relaxed state. Some drops of pre-cum had affirmed my wetness during arousal when I'd gone down on her, but my boxers soaked it up.

Her hands still inside my underwear, she gently squeezed and stroked the trunk as she looked at me, squinty-eyed, and augmented her pace. When I gasped, she seemed to absorb my leap of arousal and lunged off the table, pushing me backward with one hand—the other still firmly gripping my organ—until I faithfully plopped down as she guided me to a seat in the front row.

"I always wanted you in the front row," she said.

The seat's little side-desk was folded up but not lowered. I clutched onto it as Clair pulled my now-loosened pants and boxer shorts in one bundle down below my knees. She stared up at me as she brought the flat of her tongue to the tip of my penis. As if by reflex I covered my eyes with my palm to try and contain this new sensation, sightlessly. Her entire mouth was covering

me, and sounds of suction and lip smacking engrossed my ears while a bottomless weakness seemed to unnerve my lower body. My other hand gently held the back of her head. Clair's free hand rested on my stomach, and her fingers crept up my chest. Her tempo enhanced, now joined by both hands sleekly wringing up and down the shaft like she was in a gym using a wrist roller.

Time slowed. I gasped incessantly, breathlessly holding my lungs so hard I thought I might pass out.

"I—I—," were the stuttered sounds I managed to get out. "I think I'm going to cum soon," I warned, thinking it the considerate thing to do.

Continuing to twist and squeeze both hands up and down, she lifted her head for a moment. "It's okay, go ahead." She amplified her grip and speed.

My eyes were clenched shut and shielded under my forearm. In my mind, I saw stars streak past, like the warp-drive light show in *2001: A Space Odyssey*. My whole body was tense and stiff until, at last, an electric liquid-release oozed out of me, leaving me to convulse limp and slumped in the chair.

Clair beckoned me down to the floor. Already drooped, I just let myself slide off the chair, and pulled up my pants but left them unbuckled. She cuddled me with both arms and rested her head on my chest as though to comfort my weary body, sapped of all its strength. Our labored sighs filled the room and created a sweaty mustiness. The lack of air-conditioning in this school gave the air the quality of a temperate sauna. I enclosed my arms around her, ending with one hand cupping her head over my heart. We lay on the floor of the classroom and napped for a while, ensconced in a large sunspot where the sultry, mid-afternoon rays had peered in to heat the cold linoleum tile.

Chapter Eight

How does one describe feelings of undiluted happiness? That next morning felt like a drug had set into my system. I lay on my stomach, with my blankets still wrapped over me, and opened the window behind my bed, which let the bleak air rush in. Pulling in a thick gust of air enlarged my nostrils. The air seemed fresher. Later, in the kitchen, the banana I snacked on at the table seemed richer, riper, fruitier. In fact, just sitting at the table for an extended time, longer than it takes to ceremonially eat a meal with family, was something I never did. I sat, at ease, posed with one hand on the table and the other in my lap, appreciating the new day. The strange occurrence startled my mom when she walked into the kitchen. We sat and chatted, unceremoniously. I couldn't remember the last time that happened. She asked me if I liked Butch Prep and, for the first time, I said, "I think I'll stay at this one."

A flush of modest excitement passed over her face. "What will you do this week during the strike?" she asked.

"There's some rallies at various schools—ours, too," I remarked. "I'm going to go to those. And some big marches. I was at one yesterday."

"I'm so proud of you," she said. "Those poor teachers need the support. That horrible mayor of ours would sell out his own grandmother." She rose from the table, pecked a kiss at the crown of my head and started to gather her purse and coat on her way out the door to work. "Don't forget," she called from the hall, "I'm going to visit grandma on Friday after I get off work. I'll be back Sunday night. Are you sure you don't want to come?"

"No, mom, I'm sorry, I can't," I called back. "I have a student-teacher conference." I simpered wryly because that wasn't exactly a lie. It was a certain perspective on the situation. "We're having a one-on-one session while school is out during the strike so I can catch up on what I missed at the beginning of the year."

"That's nice of your teacher. Your grandma will understand."

"Maybe next time? Give grandma a hug for me."

And that was that. It became my mission then and there to bring Clair back to my house during the weekend. No more inhibitions, just the thrill of hosting her on my home turf. It made me seem more grownup somehow.

The rally was at Union Park in the near-western part of the city, where I rarely had reason to venture. The best part of trekking out that way was the newness of its location for Clair and me. Constant change of setting and scenery seemed, to me, crucial for our relationship's sustenance. I didn't know why at the time, but I kept reacting to an inner need to continually add fuel to a fire, racing against a ticking clock.

Arriving at the park off the train, I didn't know where the rally was being held, so I listened for cheers and looked out for scarlet-clad people. Soon both were apparent and pulled me to a wide clearing among baseball fields. I walked from a direction that edged me against a makeshift stage that was obviously erected earlier in the day. I expected, like yesterday at the march, that I wouldn't notice anyone I knew, other than Clair, but there, towering above me, was Mrs. Karky. Brightened by the sun, she graced the stage like she was running the show, which made sense, as she was one of the ringleaders, according to Clair.

"Looking out over this proud sea of teachers, I see some of my former students," Mrs. Karky began. Many in the crowd responded with cheers. She raised her voice, like she was calling far off into an ocean from the shore. "Where are the parents? Where are *my* parents? Where are the parent professionals?" A barrage of applause followed this rallying call. Once she had them riled, an oration began. "Fellow teachers, I have to tell you I am very tired, as you can imagine." She sighed with an air of fatigue. "But what I'm tired of are the lies and the name-calling and the vilification by the mayor against the people who do the work—" She punched the next three words, "*every—single—day* to make a difference in our children-in-Chicago's lives."

Before long, the crowd was on fire.

"I want them to turn off the air-conditioning at one-twenty-five South Clark Street so the mayor's handpicked school board can work like we work," Karky continued. "I want them to turn off the air-conditioning in City Hall and let them work like we work! It doesn't matter where we work, even at our district college prep schools, the conditions are all the same. One hundred sixty of our elementary schools don't even have a library!"

I suddenly remembered, in a montage of images flipping like playing cards across my brain, each one of the glowering faces that adorned her classroom walls and ceiling on my first day of class. Their fierce eyes and unflagging defiance pierced my memory now. They were all in Mrs. Karky up on that stage.

"I'm tired of billionaires, like our mayor of the one percent, telling us what we need to do for our children, as if they love our children more than we do," Mrs. Karky said. "They have the money, they have the media, but we have something they don't have—us. Everyone. There isn't one civil service union in this city that doesn't support us. Even the headmaster of the elite, twenty-thousand-yearly-tuition private day school where the mayor sends his children agrees with us on the issues we're striking over—prioritizing the arts and sciences, long-term fair pay, and refusal to allow standardized testing be the bludgeoning basis for teacher evaluations to use over our heads as one more tool to cleanse teachers out of this district."

The boisterous crowd, cheering once again, drew my attention. People's feet and shoes tell a million different tales. I looked around at the legs of hundreds of striking teachers and their supporters, wondering what such legs would look like. Funny—the fleshy rails wore mostly dark blue jeans or white or dark shorts and socks. One pair caught my eye—amber work boots and scruffy pants, the custodian from Butch Prep. He was in the crowd watching the rally, a supporter. I guess that answers my question to Clair from yesterday, I thought. I was glad his back was turned to me. He wouldn't see me if I could help it.

It's not that I avoided him out of malice or distrust, but out of unexplainable embarrassment. I didn't want to draw attention to myself. It didn't matter, though, because he was rapt in the speech, anyway. My eyes panned the crowd slowly and steadily from face to face, seeing if I could spot Clair, when a finger tapped my shoulder. Clair, I expected. But it wasn't Clair; it was the custodian. A gentle smile rested on his face.

"Hey there, sport. I thought it was you. I recognize you from Butch Prep."

"Yeah. Hey," I said.

"Great to see you here," said the custodian. "We need more support from the students. It was a battle getting fellow janitors to strike, too, but some of us are."

"You're striking, too?"

He tilted his head. "Well, some of us, anyhow."

I tried to think of something to say, something cordial, something casual.

"My name's Joe," he said.

"Telly."

We shook hands and parted ways pretty quickly, which was all right with me. Social graces sometimes befuddle me, and I need to duck out. Besides, I wanted to find Clair.

Finding Clair was like finding Waldo in those children's books. She found me again, though. She tends to do that. I didn't know if I should read something into that. Soon after some more speeches, we made our way back to Butch Prep, in separate train cars.

Closing the classroom door, she whipped around, and I saw she had a dry and deadpan facial expression. Her lips were pursed around a square, plastic-wrapped packet that I recognized as a condom. The sight of it made me chuckle; she grinned triumphantly.

But she didn't take it out of her mouth; she only stood there. Just before I asked if she was waiting for me to do something, she began unbuckling her shorts and let them drop to her ankles. When her hands grabbed two wads of her shirt at the waist, poised to pull the covering off over her head, her eyes started marshalling downward at the condom packet. The easy thing to do would have been to simply take it with my fingers. But no way. I wanted to play my own spin on her mime game. With some finessing effort, I stepped forward, carefully avoiding body contact, took the condom between my teeth, and held it ready for her to pass on to me. She snickered but muffled the laughter through low, rapid puffs out of her nose as we stood there, eye to eye. We were millimeters apart but still didn't touch. She let go at last.

I stepped back, with the condom in my teeth and unbuckled, shuffling off my own shorts while she abruptly swept off the red union shirt over her head, revealing a sable bra that matched the frames of her absent glasses. She purposefully wore contact lenses to convenience our physical rendezvous.

Now I was the one signaling at the packet with my eyes. She stepped forward, gripped the condom with her lips and stepped back as I pulled off my shirt like peeling the loose skin from an onion. Our process had grown smoothly mechanical by now.

Condom in lips, Clair trotted over to the front table and hopped on the top. She spit the packet beside her—all the while pleasantly watching me, like I was the one on show for her—and started shimmying off her panties. I didn't want to fall behind the strip count, so I hurried over to the table, slipping off my boxers and tearing into the condom wrapper as her hands disappeared behind her back to loosen her bra. We were both wearing tennis shoes, and left them on through every round of this casual striptease, perhaps because of the cold floor, on which wearing only socks would prove too slippery for our purposes.

I placed the sterile rubber disk over my penis and started draping the fitted edges down the neck. The tactile motion reminded me of steadily removing a rubber band from a rolled-up poster, inch by inch.

"I am *so* wet for you already," she said, as she braced four fingers together to stroke up and down her inner labia, pivoting with her thumb pressed against her clit.

"You don't want me to—" I finished my sentence, not with words, but with innuendo, and rocked my head back and forth, pursing a tight smile as an offer to whet her vagina as a prelude to intercourse, thereby building the sexual crescendo we created yesterday.

"No. I want you inside me right now." It was nearly a commanding order.

Before that time, I'd only done sex with one other person, and we had done it lots and lots and lots of times. But there was still much to the zesty physical exchange I had not yet grown accustomed to. I second-guessed myself as to what I should do, and she sensed my gingerly, nearly hesitant, approach.

With her guiding hand, I slid into her and reached all the way back in her womb on the first thrust. She inhaled at the same rate and depth of the passage, as though absorbing the impact. She was right about being wet already. It would've been superfluous to go down on her. My feet were still on the ground, though now slightly raised on my tiptoes, and my arms poised outstretched on the table, pinned against the outsides of her shoulders. We initially coasted at a gentle, rocking pace. Her hands were now dull claws, with the thumb and four fingers acting as two soft talons kneading the baby-fat heft around my flanks, just above my hips. Sweat began to gel around my temples and inner thighs.

I grumbled out a murmur of exertion—not loud, but expressive enough to echo in the room.

"I like when you grunt as you dig into me," she said mischievously. "Like a hog. Am I making you work for this, huh?"

I didn't answer at first, busy concentrating on my rhythm, but her voice teased me on, salaciously, arousing me. I could feel the sweat start to vaporize all over me, which cooled me like an engine at the brink of its highest gear.

"I imagine you bent over me wearing one of those iron Norse helmets with horns. Come on, Telly Jorgenson, fuck me like a Viking. Drive into me."

Being spurred on this way prompted me to raise the force but not the speed of my lunges against the table and her. It felt more like grinding.

"That's it. Can you go deeper?" she panted. "Do you like driving into me with your Norwegian wood?"

"Fuck yeah I do," I said, in between breaths. "I want to lick your fire." That gave me an image in mind I wanted to describe to her. "My spit is kerosene," I said. "Light up my saliva all over your vagina." It wasn't a Shakespeare sonnet, but it would do.

An ecstatic, open-mouthed smile, like a silent laugh, expanded over her face. She dipped her head back, showing her elongated throat that attracted a flurry of tongue-laced kisses from me.

"What a poet," she said, amused. "Okay," she said. "Lick my fire. And then I want to lick yours."

Chapter Nine

The week's activities reminded me of a truculent army's siege on a medieval town. The teachers continued to go without work or pay, and the mayor and school board waited them out. The school authorities were clearly frustrated. They were losing. Downtown negotiations occurred nonstop all week. Gigantic red ribbons, a signal of supporting the strike, appeared wrapped around tree trunks throughout the city. The rally at Butch Prep was on Friday, seemingly a culmination to the week's rising tension, like how a rubber band actually physically heats up when stretched out to its breaking point.

The frequency of Clair's and my sexual rendezvous at school increased as the week progressed, and become more casual. Some were spontaneous, and some were planned. The only understood, unwritten rule about them was that we needed to visit the school to fuck at least once a day, always after a strike support action of some sort, and sometimes before, as well. I knew this rate could only last so long, but this time I wasn't so afraid of it ending.

"What position do you want to try now?" asked Clair.

"Something we haven't tried?" I suggested. "How about I get behind you so you're on your knees and palms, and I'm on my knees, too?"

"You know," she said in a smart-alecky tone, "it's okay to say you want me doggy-style." I laughed sheepishly. "Okay," I said. "I want you doggy-style."

I pushed into her from behind, pressing the flat of my stomach against her lower back. We both let out low moans. The skin along the broadside of her back felt warm like an oven sheet. Reaching behind her, her hand stroked up and down my leg, softly squeezing my calf and feeling down my ankle and back up again as I nestled from side-to-side to get settled inside her. One of my hands firmly grasped the back of her neck, then around and down to her breast, while the other held fast to the sharp end of her pelvic bone for support. We found a steady rhythm. We were just warming up. The air was, again, musty but stimulating.

Standing up and reaching behind her to cup the back of my head, she grabbed my hair with all her fingers, and curled it into a fistful. I didn't know if it was a conscious signal for me to start pumping harder, but that's just what I did. She responded by pulling my hair tighter, and I replied by pumping faster.

That almost made me cum, so I slowed down and changed the rhythm to a steady heartbeat. I couldn't help think of composers, whether they made proficient lovers because they understood the effect of percussive movements on the human senses. The melody, in our case, was our chorus of groans noting joyful approval and our satisfying sighs mixing with the hot breath on each other.

After I came, the rush of strength leaving my body, I rested my forehead on the broadside of her back just below her neck, as if praying at an altar. I exhaled my whole being, like I was expelling my soul into hers.

We stood there, catching our breath, clutching each other's warm and wet bodies. I could hear each swallowing gulp she made to moisten her mouth and keep it from drying. Her heart still beat loudly, knocking against mine during our embrace.

"Did you cum?" I asked her.

"Not yet."

"I can still go longer."

"Really?" She turned around.

"Yeah," I said. "I want to. Where do you want me?" I smiled kindly.

She smiled in reply and kissed my mouth. "On my chair."

She led me by the hand, gently grasping my middle and forefingers as I followed her to the corner desk. Mrs. Karky's great black computer chair, now Clair's, was more like a throne, firm and wide-framed.

"Oh, wait, I have to close the blinds," she said.

"Why? We've been fucking in here every day," I said. "You left them open the other day, too. Nothing happened. This building is locked, dark, and deserted."

She didn't give it another thought as she climbed over me, one knee at a time.

"Slap my ass," Clair said, after she straddled me and started to ease into me.

"Really? Are you sure?"

"Yeah."

SLAP-SLAP went both my hands on her ass. It felt like revving an engine or whipping a horse at the height of a race. She inhaled sharply through her clenched teeth, making the sound of a hiss. Her rhythm rocking on top of me doubled.

"Oh, yeah, that's it, Telly," she panted

"Oh, God, Clair," I croaked.

SLAP-SLAP again. And again. And again. She still wore her shoes, and I gripped them as she continued to ride me.

But then something appeared in my periphery that wasn't there before. A figure. My eyes shot to the side. Mrs. Grendel, the Vice Principal, stared through the opened blinds at us. I froze, but Clair was entranced, her eyes shuttered, and using both my shoulders to leverage her grinding and bouncing on top of me. Grendel and I were locking eyes. She wasn't looking away or moving. She wasn't afraid to be seen. She kept watching.

There was something perverse in how Grendel stared back. It was not like she wanted to join in, just watch. She wasn't shocked or offended, that much was clear. She was observing. I noticed her eyes jump to several points up and down our naked, entangled bodies.

What she did next was barely perceptible. I swear, I swear to God, she licked her lips.

"Clair—" I hesitated, as I looked back at Grendel who hadn't budged nor blinked. I repeated, "Clair," and she intensified digging into me.

The force took the wind out of me, ecstatically. She held my cheeks with the palm of her hands, breathing torridly in my face. She had a solemn look about her as she breathed, transfixed as though she was in devout prayer.

When I mustered the strength to glance back toward the door, Grendel was gone.

Chapter Ten

Saturday arrived at last. The long while I sat pondering, through my kitchen window I watched the stale golden streaks of daylight subsume into azure evening. Clair would arrive at my house soon. Excited anticipation for her to see how I lived and for us to have a more intimate kind of privacy—even if it really only meant having a bed to fuck on—intermixed with pangs of conscience that kept etching at my brain. Clair should know that Mrs. Grendel saw us fucking and could be planning any number of stratagems against her and the teachers and the strike. Clair's job could be at stake. But did Clair have to know right away? It was the weekend, after all. What difference could it make? She would worry for nothing. Telling her would ruin tonight's specialness for both of us. Clair might even be so distraught that she'd withdraw or break away from me. It would be the fallout from our first kiss all over again—and one hundred times worse. It made sense to wait to tell her. But, then again, she also had to know.

She came in. We kissed, we cooked, we ate. I just couldn't seem to find the right moment to tell her. I don't suppose there was, or could be, a right moment. I didn't know why it was so difficult to tell her, even to start the conversation. We had that agonizing conversation the day after our first kiss. If I could get through that, why couldn't I get through this? Perhaps because it was my secret, my responsibility to tell her, to initiate the discussion this time. She's stronger than me, I thought. I'd just put it off a little longer and enjoy this uniquely intimate alone time.

After dinner, we took a shower together. It seemed so grown up. We even bantered in the bathroom after we brushed our teeth together, and she teased me for not flossing like she was doing. I told her I never flossed, and she lectured me on how crucial it was, that brushing was not enough. Although I didn't take it seriously—set in my ways, I guess—I relished that we could be comfortable and tolerant of our small personality differences.

The shower didn't dampen our desire for sex, as I might've expected from soap within reach and water splashing here and there. I wanted to go down on her again. I think she was amused by the fact that I liked doing it so much. And this time I was more at ease with the situation. The thought of water sanitizing the area washed away any prior reluctance I'd felt. In other words, I didn't gag this time. It was like kissing a fountain. Pressing my lips even for a moment on her vagina's surface created a break in the gushing water. I had to struggle for footing and to breathe regularly. But once I did, I could feed off her groans and whimpers to guide which areas to focus on, in varying levels of intensity. The running water provided stimulating background noise.

Afterward, we dallied through the period of wet hair and moist skin. I always like to take my time out of the shower, though I only get to do that when my mom is gone from the house. I had a towel around my waist only. She was already dressed.

One of the things in my private world I wanted to show her was my cherished record collection. When I was a kid and early teenager, I obsessively collected records—specifically those small 45s. God, that seemed so long ago. I indulged an inner adoration for original rock and roll and old rhythm and blues.

As a naked DJ in a towel, I was playing records for her, one by one, cycling through my favorites. She got up and danced a few. I'd never seen her dance before but, of course, I'd

imagined it. Her lithe movements were stunning to watch. She was totally comfortable in her skin.

I wanted to join in. We slow danced to "Smoke Gets in Your Eyes" by The Platters, and the song's beautifully flickering harp tingled up and down my spine. I might be in love with this girl, I thought. The realization gave me goose bumps. But the amorous thought didn't frighten me. I welcomed it. As we danced, I held her tighter and buried my face behind her ear, her hair covering my eyes. Just then, shoulder to shoulder and our arms around each other, I had to jump back from her and lower my hands suddenly to catch my towel as it came undone. She smirked at the glimpse of nakedness I fumbled to cover up out of embarrassment. Why? She had seen more than that for sustained durations. Perhaps social convention kept me embarrassed.

"You can leave it," said Clair. "It's okay." She had a twinkle in her eye, and smiled mischievously.

I blushed, "No, thank you. I don't want to be naked when you're fully clothed," I said in a singsong voice. But I could see she wanted to see me naked, so I wanted to find a way.

That's when I thought of it. One of my favorite Big Joe Turner songs is called "Flip Flop and Fly." In that song, I sometimes wondered, never seriously, whether he was talking about letting his flappy penis hang out like a gooseneck, like when sauntering around the house. I never had an outlet for that bizarre thought until then. I wanted to translate it into a performance. I started skipping frantically through the tops of records in my box searching for it. They used to call Big Joe "The Boss of the Blues." Soon I found my stack of his records.

"I want you to hear this one," I said.

I flipped the record on. She sat on the couch and listened. With my eyes fixed on her seductively, I started moving side-to-side to the bumping rhythm, then I paced over to her and motioned her to rise with an open palm waving along to the rhythm. She got up, and we started dancing.

She never saw it coming. When the chorus sounded, I unraveled the towel with one hand, spinning it off me like a male stripper rips off his Velcro pants as Big Joe sang, "Now flip, flop and fly, I don't care if I die!" I shook my midsection like a belly dancer, accentuating the words as if they were written for that moment when the dancing organ between my legs performed for her.

Both her hands shot up to her face to cover her eyes coyly as she erupted in a drum roll of blushing laughter, though the laugh was mostly drowned out by the music.

I mimed the next lines to her by tapping on my lips with my forefinger: "Gimme one more kiss. Hold it a long, long time." I puckered my lips and waited, posing my head up, like one of those fountain statues, She leaned in and kissed me and I mimed the last line. "Now love me baby till the feeling hits my head like wine." That put us in the mood to make love right in the middle of the living room.

We were abuzz with an afterglow. Somewhere once I'd heard the phrase *pillow talk*. I think that's what this was. We were languid in everything we did. I'd brought out several pillows and blankets, and we turned the living room into an ancient Roman bathhouse. I even prepared us bowls of grapes and strawberries to add to the décor.

We lay reclining on the bundled floor, comfortably entangled in one another.

"Do you ever see yourself doing anything else but teaching?" I asked.

She averted her eyes considering the question. She answered eventually. "I don't really know how to do anything else."

Clair is in for a major struggle and doesn't know it, I thought. Grendel saw us together. I wanted to just tell her then and there.

"Clair," I began, "there's something you should know."

"Yeah?"

"I—" What are the words I should start with to tell her about Grendel? I couldn't think of any. "I'll be twenty in a few months," came the words out of my mouth at last. "I think I may want to be out of high school by then."

"That's good," she said. "There are a bunch of scholarships I know of that I've been meaning to tell you about."

I'm such a coward. I resolved to tell her next week. The strike would likely be over. It would be a new life.

A long silence passed. I lay my head on her breast as she gently ran her fingers over my hairline.

"I love you," I whispered.

"Is that the cum talking?" she asked, her hair twirling the curls of my hair.

I smiled. She's so distant, I thought to myself. A joke would take the edge off.

"No," I said. "If my cum could talk, it would say, 'Oh fuck hot damn what a rush!'"

She clenched her eyelids and dug her head back into her pillow, laughing bubbly like a mockingbird. She squeezed my head gently and kissed the top. We dropped asleep into the depths of the afternoon.

I didn't even mind that she didn't say whether she loved me back. We were together that way, then, and that's all that mattered, in a moment that seemed like it would last forever.

In a way, I knew our relationship was at its best at that point. We both took in all the nostalgic songs, and let them sink into our being and add to our perception of the world. Maybe that's what being born is like. Or maybe being born is just as painful and desperate as things were about to get.

Chapter Eleven

When I awoke, Clair slept gently next to me, a few inches from my face. I could feel her warm breath softly blow periodically. Even though she was asleep, I felt a sudden rush of humility that she trusted me enough to fall asleep next to me. Is this what real happiness feels like? She continued to sleep, unaware, while my fingers traced the contours of her face—her draped eyelids and twittering lashes, her lips relaxed by dreaming. I thought to myself, I want her to be my girlfriend.

I've never had one of those. A girlfriend. I lay there staring at the ceiling and fantasizing about holding her hand in public, going on dates in full view of everyone, going together to the movies, even cheesy tourist spots like Millennium Park or the Ferris wheel at Navy Pier. But I've never been in such a relationship. Worse, I didn't know how that could be possible or what joint decision-making goes into creating such an arrangement. I just knew I wanted it. A new level.

A cold selfishness seeped through me.

Every little thing I'd gained from Clair was built and predicated on the one before it. All the time I wanted more, and more. A picture book I read a lot as a kid came to mind. "If you give a mouse a cookie, He's going to ask for a glass of milk." Then he'll want a straw, and a napkin, a mirror, scissors, broom, and so on. For me it was gaining Clair as a secret friend, then a kiss, then sex—now I wanted a public relationship, and who knows what else afterward. Does that make me the greedy little mouse in the blue overalls?

We dressed amidst the pleasant, morning air in the room.

"Telly," said Clair, "about last night, when you told me that you—"

"Yeah." I knew what she was getting at. I was going to pay the price for telling her I loved her. She was about to give me a right talking-to.

"I don't even know what love is," she said. "So I don't know how I feel about you. I have to be honest about that."

"Okay," I said, following her line of conversation.

"All I know is," she continued, as she finished with the last button on her top, then gripping my shoulder like the first day I saw her and she convinced me to stay in school, "I like being with you. I hope that's enough, for now." She brushed my cheek gently with her knuckles.

For me, it was enough. I wanted to meet her halfway.

"Look," I said, "I don't know what this is," gesturing with a pointed forefinger between her and I, "or where it's going. But I want to go with it, however far it goes. I'm okay with that if you are."

She smiled. "Fair enough."

Clair ended the conversation, that amiable glow in her eyes that first captivated me the day she walked me to my next class and convinced me, with kindness, to stay in her class.

We leaned into each other and pecked a single kiss on each other's lips. Like couples do. I couldn't have been more thrilled.

It may have been the glow of the moment's happiness I felt, but I comforted myself that maybe nothing will come of Grendel having seen us fucking. Maybe I wouldn't ever have to tell Clair. Or maybe I'll tell her at some point so far off it wouldn't matter anymore.

We spent Sunday at Clair's house in Hyde Park. Her rich parents had gone boating in Lake Geneva in Wisconsin. I didn't know people actually went *boating*. Such are the lives of the stinking affluent. She told me how her parents had sided with the mayor over the strike, which had been the subject of many household arguments lately. Clair never quite fit their mold, having shirked attending private school for public. Imagine the embarrassment for them that she now taught in the public school system, even if it was a prep academy, in name, at least.

Her parents really knew how to pick their luxury living. The house took up practically an entire square block. Chandeliers hung sparkling in multiple rooms. A gratuitous spiral staircase coiled up the mansion's three levels. It was *Gone With the Wind's* northern slavery sister house. Either that or Gatsby's bacchanal bachelor pad in Long Island, I couldn't decide which. Both revolted me.

We sat lounging, reading, upon a large circular set of couches in one of the living rooms, when an atrocious sound began blaring in Clair's pocket. She had the same infernal phone ring as my alarm clock.

"What the—" Clair blurted out, when she looked at the screen. She curtly stood and left the room to take the call.

Some while later, she came back in, staring wide-eyed at the ground as she walked, spellbound in her head. Something clearly had her spooked.

"What is it?" I said.

"It was Mr. Anderson. He's calling me into his office. I'm supposed to bring a union rep with me."

Clair knew what that meant, and so did I—or I could imagine. Termination.

Chapter Twelve

"How can they call you into a meeting?" I said. "There's not even any school yet. And on a weekend, too."

It didn't make sense. At least, I didn't want it to.

"I don't know," said Clair, worried.

I could tell she wasn't able to form any another thought but this.

"Wait," I began, rising to my feet. This was it. I had to tell her.

"I think I may know what it's about."

"How do you know?" She just stared at me, tilting her head in surprise.

I didn't answer right away. "Look, before I tell you, I just want to say, it was an awkward situation." Clair now wrenched her brow in confusion. "It was weird." I shouldn't have built it up. She was getting agitated; I could feel her body temperature rising, so I just blurted it out. "Grendel saw us in your classroom the other day."

"What do you mean, she *saw us*?" Clair asked, cocking her head like a pistol's firing pin.

I paused to gulp, as if to oil my mouth before speaking the words, and then had out with them. "She saw us fucking on your chair."

"You knew, and you didn't say anything?" came her grating reply. She stood waiting for me to say something. I didn't. What could I say? "Why didn't you tell me?" she demanded.

"I just did."

"Fuck you."

"I just mean it's still early, you can think of a strategy before the meeting. And besides, what difference would it have made if I told you before? You only would have worried more than you are now, and earlier." Some logic and reasoning, I thought, might soften the blow.

A sudden flurry of rage came over Clair, and she shoved both hands into my chest. The blow knocked me off my feet and onto the ivory tile in her living room. The fall stung my tailbone.

Clair sighed as though she'd dropped a bag of groceries, then she knelt down to help me up. She pitied me as she might a wounded man who fell of his own carelessness. Pity was always the one thing I never would stand for, but now Clair was making me stand for it, literally, as she pulled me to my feet. She could have done anything to me at the time, and I would've taken it meekly, willingly.

"When did she see us?"

"When we were on your chair," I told her again.

"When you were slapping my ass?"

"When you were *telling* me to slap your ass," I corrected her.

"I didn't know the sixty-year-old Gorgon Vice Principal was watching," she snapped back. "Or was that it? Did you get off on her watching?"

"Oh, fuck, Clair, come off that. Of course not. I can't say she didn't get off on it. It was pretty creepy, the way she stared at us. So I froze, I didn't know how to react. Plus, I was intensely distracted when you were pounding on top of me." Clair looked like she was about to continue arguing at new levels of insistence, like asking me how hard it would have been to say, *Stop, Clair, there's someone at the window.*

But she didn't say anything more. She went off by herself and sat for what seemed an extraordinarily long time. She finally spoke.

"I must've been an idiot, fucking idiot, to think I could make this work."

I didn't know whether she meant us, this romance we got into, or whether she meant this teaching job. It didn't matter enough to me to ask. I just let her talk. Tears were welling in her eyes now.

"Hey, Clair," I said gently. "I think I know of a way this thing can be fought.

She looked up at me, hopelessly.

"You were on top of me, she didn't see your face. You were facing the corner. As long as you don't admit it, they can't pin it on you."

She was still silent.

"Look, if thousands of principal's office visits have taught me one thing it's to never admit it. They need that admission to put a ribbon and bow on their punishment. It's their way of covering their asses. Don't give it to 'em. Don't give them the satisfaction." My tone was comradely. "Please promise me you won't admit it in there tomorrow."

"I need to be alone," she said. "Can you show yourself out?"

Chapter Thirteen

All morning and half the afternoon, Clair was in successive meetings with the head union leaders, the principal, and whatever other goons he brought in. The mayor attended, for all I knew.

It was hell waiting for her to finish. I couldn't concentrate on anything else while Clair's fate was being decided.

When she finally did get out of the meetings, it took some convincing and persistence to get her to agree to see me. I'm not sure why she did see me under those circumstances. It would've made sense for her to go into seclusion after enduring meetings like that.

The ironic detail that taunted me about the whole thing was that when Clair and I met up, we did so in public. I thought it impossible to meet in public, so I never gave the idea any consideration before, beyond fitful fantasy. It didn't matter now, I supposed. We walked along the harbor that rounded Shedd Aquarium and Adler Planetarium, places I frequented as an angsty adolescent. This felt like different angst, more serious, involving another person. The wind from Lake Michigan hit us in periodic gusts that were chilling. The lake's oceanic waves were battering the port edge, the force of which sometimes jetted fountain-like streams of water twenty feet in the air. It all fit the mood well.

"It was funereal," Clair lamented, describing the atmosphere in the room when she met with the teacher union leaders. "Everyone sat around the table in the conference room and bowed their heads. Karky couldn't even look at me. The teachers felt like they were sacrificing one of their own. They knew it couldn't be any other way. There was also an undercurrent of resentment. Some resented me, others the situation."

"All this because of you and me?" I asked. It didn't seem important enough to gather so many people together for it.

"The strike is over. It'll be announced in the next day or so." Clair was grim. "Anderson and the mayor teamed up on this one. They used this scandal as leverage to break the strike. It's over. It'll distract attention from the strike, at best, and sully the name of the union, at worst. The teachers could have gotten a lot more of their demands than they did, had Anderson and the mayor not unleashed this new weapon to the five and ten o'clock news."

"What do you mean, releasing it in the news?" I said. "Did they already?"

"No," Clair answered. "Not yet. It's coming, though. Probably tomorrow."

"Jesus, fuck. Okay, but they'll get over it. You made a mistake. You're still one of them. You're still a teacher. Right? They don't have any hard evidence on you. I told you Grendel never saw your face."

She was silent, looking away from me.

"Clair." I prodded her to reassure me, but feared the worst, for my sake, since I knew it was all my fault. "Talk to me. Don't bottle it up. I'm here to hear you. Clair—"

"I admitted to it, Telly."

My heart sank, followed by a pang that spread throughout my whole chest. "What? Why? You could've beaten it."

"Don't put this on me. This happened because of you."

"I know, Clair, I'm sorry." I softly gripped her shoulder the way she held mine that day—it seemed so nostalgically long ago—when she convinced me to stay at Butch Prep for good. "I'm here for you, whatever I can do to make up for it. After all, we still have each other."

I intended to comfort her, maybe even make her smile. Instead she congealed, halting an inhaled breath, and glared at me, searching my eyes for my intentions, and disliking what she found.

"When are you going to grow up?" she shouted. "You're so selfish."

"What?" Her reaction stiffened me, stupefied. "Where did that come from?"

"I don't need to hear that shit from you, Telly."

We had stopped walking now and just faced each other.

"What shit?" I asked. She could surely sense an air of complaint in my tone and it made no difference in her. "You know what? Fuck you, Clair." Her eyes narrowed at me and her lips pursed angrily. I didn't care. I had to say this. "At least I know what I want," I persisted. "At least I know *exactly* where I want to be—"

"High school?" Clair asked derisively.

"Yes!" I roared back. My voice quieted. "And you," I said. "I want you."

There was an air of defeat in my voice that surprised me. This, everything between us, was over, crashing down before my eyes, I thought, like the waves of Lake Michigan behind us. But I kept going with what I had to say. At least I could get out what had been smoldering, suppressed deep down for as long as I'd known her. "You've *never* known what you've wanted, Clair, this whole time. You kiss me, you run away; you fuck me, we get caught, you run away. You're such a coward. You're not brave enough to let yourself love me."

"This idea you have of love," she said. "It's not real. It doesn't exist. Not between us. I don't know what you've wanted this whole time, but I've been honest with you every step of the way about how I was feeling. I didn't hear much of the same coming from you."

"Well, I—" Nothing came to mind to say.

She kept going. "It's all *whatever* for you, this scandal. It's easy for you to lead your life so brash and careless, lighthearted—you have no responsibility or professional career. You can just go to another school and keep running from your future. I can't. A scandal like this never goes away for someone like me. All this shit that's happening to me—I can't undo it. *I* am the one who is undone. I'll never work again, not in a classroom. I'll be lucky to find work anywhere." Worst part was, she didn't leave it at that. She carried on as I shrunk in silence before her. "It's easy enough for you. You're the man and you're the victim. You can dick around in high school as long as you fucking want. You can even dick around with me—and when we get caught, *I'm* the one who absorbs the shock and consequences. I mean, really, what do you want to do with your life? You're like someone who brushes but never flosses."

"You know I brush but don't floss!" I said sharply. I was trying to evade the subject by comedic ploys. She just kept right on track; she was determined to talk about all the stuff I would rather avoid.

"Yeah, well, it's true both ways," she said. "On the surface everything looks fine, but you don't take the time to face and fix any deep problems you're going through—while you're going through them—so then they get worse and you dig yourself deeper and it's harder to get out. Don't talk to me about bottling things up. You're the best at it."

The worse part of hearing all this was that she was right. But again, I didn't care.

"Don't even talk to me about me. Look at you. No one put a gun to your head this whole time," I said. "You made your own bed and then fucked me in it." I regretted it when I said it. It was a cold thing to say. And she hardened like stone.

"Yeah, I did. I can't see you, Telly. Please don't take this personally, but seeing you is a reminder of this whole mortifying experience. I have to move on and repair whatever I can. And partly that means being away from you."

Later, after walking on and on alone along the lake shore, I tried to sit and consider the agony I was feeling in hopes that analyzing it would make it hurt less. It felt like an underground explosion in my upper chest. Tremors. Reverberations. Surrounding my heart was a constellation of nerves that physically ached in waves, like headaches that pulsated with sharp stabs of pain. So, too, was this pain deep in my chest. I knew the suffering was emotional because it didn't interfere with my breathing or otherwise impede my chest's functions. Yet it ached with a dull pain that was punctuated by periodic incursions of sharper pain. I could feel my insides breaking, and watery tears start to engulf my sinuses; my cheeks pulled downward. I was imploding. This is what *heartache* must mean.

Chapter Fourteen

When the scandal broke on the ten o'clock news and morning newspapers on the same day the strike ended, everyone knew the two were related. The district didn't let Clair finish out the semester; they didn't allow her to finish out the rest of the week. She couldn't even come to school to collect her things herself. All the newspapers and TV programs that covered the scandal reported that she couldn't be reached for comment. I kept seeing her ghost—our ghosts—in the halls.

As I was *of age*, they released my name to the news, and even a yearbook photo from a couple years back that looked more like a mug shot, which was my intended portrayal at the time. The name Aristotle was published all across Chicago. After the lengths I had gone to suppress that name, it was now fit for mockery in Chicago's more than one million households.

I'm someone who likes to be invisible, but walking down the halls that morning I could feel the ice of people's stares. My presence silenced the usual commotion in the halls. They parted a path for me as I passed, and crowded against the rows of lockers on either side. They all swiveled on the balls of their feet, following me with their whole bodies as I walked. Mr. Anderson's darling jocks, all buzz-cut and pimple-faced, donned shit-eating grins at me, like they were proud. Many others peered just to get a look, not knowing anything about me before. Some looked disgusted and some indifferent.

I wanted to sling obscenities at them like mud and shit, which is what I normally would've done. But I wasn't normal anymore. I felt emptiness inside where I couldn't scrounge the will power to lash out in my guise of the kid who always had nothing to lose. Now I was just plain lost.

As I wandered through the deserted halls, relieved at last after the period bells rang, I wondered why I even came to school. I wasn't thinking straight. Clair had the right idea to lurk where no one could find her.

Joe came walking opposite me down the hall. I knew his walk from far away. His stride was rushed, tense, anxious.

"Joe," I called. He turned his head to me and slowed down. "What's wrong?"

He inhaled, looking calmed, perhaps from seeing a concerned, friendly face.

"Oh, hey, Telly." Although his twisted brow was now relaxed, he seemed to withhold some inner despair.

"What happened?" I asked.

He sighed, as though he knew I could tell he was distraught and gave up hiding it. "I just got fired."

"Oh my god, I'm sorry," I said. "Those fuckers. How? Why?"

He rotated as he talked, his feet and torso still pointed towards me, but when mentioning Anderson and the administration, his head faced in the direction of their office far off in the next building.

"I kinda want to fight it," he said as he stared toward the office, "but—" He didn't finish the sentence, like he hadn't even finished the plan; just brandishing bare, emotional loss. "I may just take that money that's accumulated all these years toward retirement and buy my dream car."

"What about your family?" I asked.

He blinked, perhaps wondering how I knew about them, which was from the photos in his office.

He smiled. "I'll get another job. They knew what I risked sticking up for the teachers. It was the right thing to do."

For a few moments, I forgot about the infamy, the stares, the shame. If Joe knew about the scandal involving Clair and me, he didn't say anything, and I loved him for that.

What Joe said hit home for me. My mom had lost her job before, more than once. I remember as a child peeking behind the wall, watching her despair, head in hands, at the kitchen table when she thought I was asleep. Now Joe, his wife and family would endure that sort of confusion and dread. Suddenly my troubles didn't seem that important to me anymore.

"If you do decide to fight it, I'll fight it with you," I said. "I'm sure others would do the same."

Where did these words come from? I thought. I believed every one of them. I meant every one of them, too. Maybe it was resentment for all the district thugs had done—to the teachers, to Clair, to me. Maybe that was part of it. But I knew what it mostly was. Like Joe said, it felt like the right thing to do.

Epilogue

In the months since I wrote down this complex episode in my life, I finished with high school, having gotten a GED, which was the easiest three weeks of my life. All that testing has paid off, too. I have full scholarship offers from several Chicago universities and some others from throughout the rest of the country. Not sure I'm ready to leave my home, though. I don't think I'm done with this place yet. I'm looking at the Labor Studies programs at the universities that are offering me what they call *full rides* at their institutions, as though their schools are amusement parks.

The scholarships make me think of Clair. They were the last thing she left me before leaving. I haven't seen, talked to, or heard from her in all these months. I'm not sure if she's still in Chicago. She could have moved to the south of France, changed her name, and is living as a painter, for all I know.

I hope she's well, though, wherever she is.

I've come to see the word *organizer* in a whole new way; it's taken on a whole new meaning. To me, no longer does it mean a bound journal or day planner. Now there's a human, breathing quality to it. It's someone who stirs things up by shoveling through the nitty-gritty of a system that functions within a society—like a school district or an industrial plant. It's someone who organizes against the messiness of life's little and big tyrannies so people can live in dignity, fulfilling work and playful leisure.

That's the job I have this summer. I'm working with Joe and others as union organizers. I'm basically an apprentice and I'm learning new things every day. There's a whole vocabulary of terms and concepts to apply in real, work-place situations. Things such as organizing models, understanding conflict theory, analyzing power systems and how to overcome them, have each been the food for my brain lately. School was never so exciting. I've realized this is the sort of education and experience I was searching for all those years and in all those schools.

As I sit eating my lunch at the edge of the lake in the city's far south side where I work, I'm genuinely placid and content. Life is good.

My phone buzzes. The screen flashes with the sender's name, "Clair!" just as I'd entered her name so long ago, and of course never erased. I get that ancestral rush of excitement I remember when she'd text me, whether expectedly or out of the blue. Though I've thought about her fairly often these past months, I've learned to live daily with the regret and sad dolor from everything that happened between and around us.

She sent a block text: "Hey Telly. It's Clair. Can we talk? I'd understand if you don't want to. But if you do, I'd like to catch up. I always regretted how we left things. I miss you."

I don't know how meeting Clair will be. I just hope I'll get a friend back. A special friend. And if there's more that comes of it, well, then, I want all that, too.

We'll see.

The End