

CHAPTER 9

The sky was bruised purple when I drove back to the apartment to change. I had half an hour to kill before picking up Janine. I dipped back into Hamlet, a copy from the school. The pages smelled like dusty classrooms. I wanted to prepare something for my niece to show her that I was trying. It was like being back at school and doing an assignment. Thee and thou no longer felt like a foreign language. I'd started to hear the rhythm under Shakespeare's words. I had to admire the guy. Not a single *fuck* in the whole play. Gotta admire the craft.

North Westbridge Academy rose out of the city like a polished monolith of privilege. The iron gates gleamed even under the fading light. Parking my diminutive hatchback between a Mercedes and a Jaguar didn't exactly exhibit the virtues of elitism. The drivers shot me looks that said I had wandered into the wrong zoo enclosure. I was tempted to walk with a stoop, dragging my knuckles on the ground.

Kids spilled out of the main doors in messy streams, laughing, shouting, buzzing with the release of another school day. I scanned the crowd and spotted Janine's friend, Amy, moving through the others like a catwalk model with attitude. Today she was resplendent in her standard school uniform with her hair all regulation. My nickname for her was the queen of the shrug. She had turned this simple human affectation into something the likes of Meryl Streep would be proud of.

And the Oscar for the best shrug goes to...

"How's things, Amy?" I asked. "How's Jake?"

When I first met Amy, she had been arm in arm with what had been described as an

unsuitable boy. He was over six foot of densely packed muscle. The only empty space was between his ears.

She offered me one of her regal shrugs. It was like watching the actress Megan Fox toss her hair in slow motion.

"I'm over Jake," she declared. "I've evolved. I prefer a man with a little more sophistication."

"Jake the Neanderthal isn't sophisticated?" I asked. "I'm shocked."

"He wouldn't know how to spell sophisticated," she said.

"I will not have my friend Jake's character impugned," I said.

Her eyes flickered, just enough for me to know the word had skipped over her head. I could tell she desperately wanted to ask what it meant but having questioned her ex boyfriend's intelligence she could hardly be seen to be as equally stupid.

"Yeah, well he's history," she said. "Janine's in English with Chris. See ya." She beat a hasty retreat.

Inside, the corridors smelled of floor polish and stale teenage sweat. After a week of visiting the school, the building was as familiar as my own apartment. Rumours about my role in Janine's rescue had grown to epic proportions, a mixture of myth and hyperbole with each retelling. The staff now looked at me with a mix of suspicion, curiosity and veiled desire. Those emotions were very gender specific, with the exception of the male French teacher who blushed every time he saw me.

Janine spent most of the after school periods in her English class. She was planning to follow in the family footsteps and study English at university and perhaps even become a teacher like her mother.

I stood outside the door peering in through the narrow strip of clear glass. Janine was

sitting to one side of the teacher's desk pointing at something in the open page of a book. Beside her sat Christine Blake. She was five foot nine in her bare feet and her blonde hair was short and slightly spikey. Her eyes were the bluest I'd ever seen. There was a piercing quality about them that made eye contact an intense experience. I couldn't deny I was becoming besotted. She looked like Charlise Theron on a good day and as far as I could tell, Theron rarely had a bad one. I entered the room and waved.

"Uncle Rick," Janine acknowledged with her own wave. "Nearly finished."

"No rush," I said, taking a seat at one of the desks in the front.

Christine flicked her eyes up from the book and smiled at me. I felt that familiar surge of electricity thrum through my body.

"Hello Rick," she said.

"Hello, miss," I said. "I've come to do my lines."

She arched a brow. "Have you been a naughty boy?"

I put on my best dramatic voice. "I have done a bloody deed! Almost as bad, good teacher, as kill a king and marry with his brother."

Janine groaned. "He's reading *Hamlet*."

"Well done you," Christine said. "Interesting adaptation. I don't remember the word teacher being in that line. Not exactly a rhyming couplet is it?"

"Give me a break," I said. "I was improvising to fit the circumstances."

"And for that," she replied, "you get a gold star."

Out of the corner of my eye I could see Janine rolling her eyes.

Christine closed the book and said, "We'll carry on with this tomorrow, okay?"

"Okay, Chris, thanks." Janine packed the books in her bag.

"What, no miss?" I challenged. "Since when have students been on first name terms

with their teachers.”

“Since the beginning of this century,” Christine said. “But only my favourites.”

“Does that mean I’m one of your favourites?” I asked.

“It’s a distinct possibility,” she said. “A man who rescued my favourite student deserves to be in that select group. You are, after all, a modern day knight in shining armour.”

“Shiny it ain’t,” I said. “It’s considerably tarnished.”

“I can forgive a little rust,” she fired back. “Have they found that man who was involved in Janine’s abduction.”

“The police are still looking,” I said.

Janine stood and collected together her bag and coat and we walked to the classroom door.

“It’s embarrassing watching you two flirt,” Janine whispered. “Why don’t you just ask her out. I’m worried you’ll die a lonely, old man.”

“You think I have a chance?” I asked.

“You may be a tough guy,” she said. “But you know nothing about women.”

I opened the door and said, “Wait for me at the entrance. I’m going in.”

Janine left and I turned back to face Christine. She looked up from her books and offered me hope and encouragement with her spotlight smile.

“So,” I said, clearing my throat. “Do English teachers go on dates?”

“I’m sure they do,” she said, tilting her head slightly.

I shuffled my feet like a guilty schoolboy on detention.

“Okay, you’re not going to make this easy for me, are you?” I said. “Does this particular teacher go on dates?”

“Not as often as she would like.”

“Would she consider going on a date with a man with good diction and thuggish overtones?”

“She would be delighted to,” she said, laughing.

She was teasing me, and I liked it. I walked back to the desk and handed her one of my official cards. “Write your number on the back and I’ll call you?”

As she wrote the number something occurred to her and she said, “Actually, I have some theatre tickets for tomorrow night. I was going with a friend, but she’s had to cancel. Would you like to go with me? Coincidentally, it’s Hamlet. We can call it your assignment.”

“I’d be happy to go,” I said. “What time is it?”

“Eight,” she said. “We can catch the tube into London.”

“Good idea. Add your address to the back of the card and I’ll pick you up at seven.”