

“Ms. Danford! Ms. Danford!”

Hope looked up from the lesson plans she had almost completed for the next week and held back a sigh. It was little Johnny. Again. This was about the tenth time the kid had raised his hand since their restroom break after lunch. Well, not really, but it sure did seem like it. He’d *just* gone a second time not long ago. She’d been warned kindergartners had bladders the size of a walnut, but come on.

“Johnny,” Hope said, getting up from her desk and walking over to him. She squatted down beside his chair and gave him her best smile. “Sweetie, you just went ten minutes ago.”

“But I couldn’t *make* it quick,” he whispered. She followed his worried gaze as he looked around at a few of his surrounding classmates. None of them were paying any attention to them since they were all busy on their end-of-the-day artwork. He turned back to her. “And *you* said make it quick.” His voice went even lower. “So’s I didn’t poop.”

“Ah...” She glanced at the wall clock. School let out at two-thirty, and it was going on two. She smiled at him again. “Can you hold it until you get home?”

Johnny’s eyes went wide as he furiously shook his head. She took a breath, about to encourage him to hang in there when the aroma of eau de poo hit her. Hope closed her mouth tightly and wrinkled her nose about the same time some of the rest of the class caught the scent.

“Eeuwww. Who farted?” Toby called out.

“You farted!” Cindy laughed out. “My dad says, when you smelted it you dealt it—or somethin’ old people says like that.”

Laughter rang out in the classroom while poor little Johnny’s face turned a bright red. Hope slowly rose and frowned at several of the children who were making raspberry noises across the room at each other, while a couple of the more talented boys managed some quite impressive underarm farts.

She was on the cusp of losing control. She could feel it.

“Okay, class,” Hope said, clapping her hands. “That’s enough. No one...” She was not going to use the word *fart* in her classroom. “No one...made a smelly.”

“A what?” Mikey said, looking up at her from his drawing, his nose scrunched.

Toby was happy to interpret. “It means fart!” He stood up from his seat and ran around his desk, chanting. “Fart, fart, fart!”

Little Johnny tugged on her dress. “Ms. Danford.” The aroma wafting up was getting stronger as she met his now panic-stricken hazel eyes. “I got’s a prairie dog.”

“Okay, go.” She helped him up from his seat and rushed him to the door while grabbing a bathroom pass on the way. The poor little guy was walking funny by the time she shoved the pass in his hand and pushed him into the hallway.

“I’ll be lucky if they don’t fire me first thing Monday morning,” she muttered, shutting the door and blowing away a piece of loose strawberry blonde hair that had fallen in front of her eyes. She tensed. Crap. She’d just broken the first cardinal rule of kindergarten teachers—never turn your back on the pack. It was the one thing all the seasoned teachers had drilled into her during her student teaching days.

The racket of escalating chaos continued to reign behind her, so she slowly turned back to the group of twenty-one five-year-olds, her shoulders sagging in relief when she didn’t see anyone with glue in their hair or scissors being used as swords.

“All right, everyone. Let’s settle down,” she said loudly enough to be heard over the children’s laughter as they continued discussions on various bodily functions. And to think she’d been congratulating herself on being one of the few first-year teachers at the school who had managed to keep her class in order.

It was certainly an interesting way to end her first week of teaching. That was for sure.

Five minutes and one tiny bribe of cupcakes during snack time the next Friday later, everyone had settled down. Was it a good teaching practice? No. Would she ever do it again if necessary? Absolutely. “Whatever worked” was her motto. Thankfully the last thirty minutes of the afternoon went off without incident.

Even Johnny had managed to smile about the upcoming treat when he’d returned to the classroom. He’d told her he’d made it to the bathroom *just* in time with only a slight skid mark. It seemed five-year-olds liked to overshare.

The final bell rang, and her kids lined up at the door before leaving the room single file, with Toby sharing one final underarm fart on his way out. The kid definitely had some talent.

Luckily, she didn’t have car rider line duty and was able to hand her still semi-rowdy crew over to the poor teachers standing outside in the August heat and then get back to her room within a few minutes.

It didn't take long to straighten up individual desks and chairs, put away a few supplies that had been left out, and save Mikey's colorful artwork of a farting unicorn he'd left behind. She laughed and slid it into her planning folder. It was definitely going on her refrigerator. She gave the room a final once-over and nodded in satisfaction before plopping into the seat at her desk and putting her head down on her crossed arms.

"I need a nap."

She closed her eyes and let out sigh of relief while taking the next few moments to bask in the quiet of the room before checking the clock again. She had plans with Haven and Destiny for the evening—sort of a celebration of Hope making it through her first week of teaching. She chuckled to herself. They were gonna love the fart story.

She hauled her twenty-pound purse—no joke—out of her desk drawer and dug her phone out to leave a text in the group message they'd kept going for years. She grimaced at the screen. "Twelve texts." They'd started about the time the dismissal bell had rung.

HAVEN: HOPE, DID YOU SURVIVE YOUR FIRST WEEK?

DESTINY: OF COURSE SHE DID.

DESTINY: AT LEAST I HOPE SHE DID.

HAVEN: HOPE HOPES. FUNNY.

DESTINY: WHAT?

HAVEN: NOTHING.

DESTINY: RU THERE?

HAVEN: I'M HERE.

DESTINY: NO HOPE!

HAVEN: THAT'S FUNNY TOO. NO HOPE. LOL.

DESTINY: WHAT HAS CAL DONE TO YOU?

HAVEN: MMM... EVERYTHING...

DESTINY: SMDH

Hope laughed and added in a reply.

HOPE: I'M HERE. I SURVIVED. I DON'T WANT TO KNOW  
WHAT "EVERYTHING" MEANS. WHERE'S MY RAINBOW  
MARGARITA?

HAVEN: MEET US AT DAD'S OFFICE ONE HOUR.

HOPE: YOUR DAD'S OFFICE?

Hope had no desire to go to Mr. Sheppard's office.

*He* might be there, and she didn't like him—the insufferably rude, bossy, overbearing, know-it-all, and all-around irritating Declan Carter. He'd become a real pain in her butt. And as much as she wanted nothing to do with him, he just seemed to keep popping up when she least expected him.

For instance, take a couple of weeks before when she'd brought Tim by Haven's and Cal's. Haven had wanted to meet him, so they'd swung by after going out on their second date. Tim taught fourth grade at her school. The man was funny, nice looking in that academic sorta way, was taller than her by at least an inch—a definite plus—and seemed to have more than a passing interest in her.

That was until *he* had shown up unannounced.

Declan had walked into the house and given her the beginnings of that slow, sexy smile she had a hard time resisting. But before it could become full-blown, his scowling gaze had zeroed in on Tim's arm draped around her shoulders. After that, Declan had done nothing but taken time about throwing irritated looks at her and menacing ones at Tim.

He'd all but ignored her pointed looks at him until she'd had enough and finally mouthed, "What's your problem?" when no one was looking. All the bane of her existence had done was growl and cross his arms before giving her a heated look she *still* felt herself growing wet over.

It wasn't too long after she'd told Tim she had to get going. She hadn't really, but she'd been about to turn into a puddle of melting goo with each pass of Declan's eyes over her body.

There was only so much a girl could take.

And Declan, the rat, had been well aware of what he was doing to her—if his knowing smirk was anything to go by.

Haven had walked Hope to the door. When she'd noticed Tim was missing, she'd turned around in time to see Declan glowering down at him and murmuring something she couldn't hear but had Tim's eyes widening and face flushing.

*Whatever* Declan had said—Tim had refused to tell her—he'd wasted no time in rushing her to his car and basically throwing her inside before driving her to the apartment she shared with Destiny. The last thing he'd said was, "You've got some scary friends," and then sped off like a horde of demons was chasing him.

To this day, Tim wouldn't even talk to her, much less look at her. In fact, she'd noticed all the male teachers gave her a wide berth.

Anyhow, she saw no sense in walking into the bear's lair, so to speak, when she didn't have to.

HOPE: WILL MR. RUDE BE THERE?

HAVEN: YOU MEAN DECLAN? LOL

DESTINY: DON'T WORRY. I'VE ALREADY ASKED. MR. RUDE AND FUNNY MAN ARE OUT OF THE OFFICE.

HOPE: I'M IN. SEE YOU THEN.

Hope dropped her phone back into her purse, grabbed her folder, and tidied up her desk before doing one more check of her classroom—all while trying her best to keep a pair of dark blue eyes under a stern black brow from filling her mind. She needed to quit dwelling on him. The man had been nothing but surly and at times downright territorial-ish toward her when he had no right to be.

And, okay, yes, if Hope was being totally honest with herself, when Declan hovered over her, it did give her a slight thrill to have a man stand next to her she actually had to look up at. But that was beside the point. Because while Declan Carter might be tall, dark, and handsome, she wasn't interested in a guy with caveman tendencies and enough broody sexiness to make a woman stupid.

Really, she wasn't.

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"I thought you said *he* wasn't going to be here today," Hope muttered, leaning down to Destiny's ear as she tried her best to ignore the newly bearded man—lord help her—currently staring at her from across the room. She turned her back on him. Out of sight, sort of out of mind.

"Don't blame me. Haven's the one who said he'd be out."

Haven. Hmm...

It was almost like she *wanted* her and Declan to be thrown together. And come to think of it, he was at Haven's and Cal's place an awful lot whenever Hope made plans to visit her, but not so much at the times she just happened to drop by.

She was going to have a talk with her other best friend.

"At least Garrett's not here," Destiny said, looking around with a slight frown. Her words said one thing, but her expression told another story. In fact, her face had kind of fallen when they'd walked in and Declan had been sitting in the outer office by himself. Her friend could protest all she wanted about how much she wasn't attracted to Garrett, but Hope had seen the shy glances and outright longing stares Destiny had given Garrett when he wasn't looking.

Her friend had it bad, which was good.

She hoped.

"Yeah. I bet you're not disappointed at all." Hope grinned and hip-checked her friend, which actually was more like Hope's hip to Destiny's arm. The two of them were so opposed in height it was kind of funny, especially on the rare occasions when Destiny wasn't wearing her heels. It was at those times Hope truly felt like an Amazon next to her diminutive friend.

"I don't know what you mean."

"Sure you d—"

"Hello, Hope." Hope tensed as Declan's low murmur against her ear sent shivers racing over her skin. He was close enough that his heat reached out to her and sent a tingling into places she'd rather not contemplate at the moment.

*Maybe if I ignore him, he'll go away.*

"Now who's being rude?" he said on a laugh.

She narrowed her gaze and turned toward him, which might not have been a good idea since they were practically toe to toe. She took a step back and then looked way up to meet his twinkling blue eyes. Why did they have to be so clear and beautiful? "Hello, Mr. Carter." And why, oh why, did he have to make her feel so delicate when all she'd ever felt was out of place around the male of the species.

It wasn't like she hadn't been around guys taller than her. Plenty of the athletes she'd gone to school with over the years had towered over her, but they had seemed to gravitate toward

petite girls like Destiny who they could basically carry around like a football, basketball, or whatever ball from their chosen sport.

She glanced at her friend, who would never allow herself to be one of those girls. Not after—

“Mr. Carter?” He frowned. “What’s with that?”

She gave him a smile. “I’ve always been told to respect my elders.”

Beside her, Destiny let out a decidedly unladylike snort.

“Respect your…” His lips tightened into a straight line before he tilted his head back and closed his eyes while his lips moved. What she wouldn’t give to lick along the strong column of his neck and rub her cheek against his neatly trimmed beard.

Wait. Was he counting?

“Hey,” Haven said, coming out from Cal’s office with her fiancé close behind her. “How’s it going out here?” Her expectant gaze bounced between her and Declan.

Hope grimaced at her and crossed her arms. “How do you think it’s going?” She raised a brow. “Hmm?”

“Oh,” Haven said, her expression faltering. “It’s going like *that*.”