

Sweet Child of Mine

by Mira Peckham

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Chapter 1

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I've been a teacher now for nearly twenty years, and, frankly, I think it might possibly be the most difficult position anyone could take. You constantly have to come up with new and different ways to get the message across to students who, often, want to be anywhere except in your classroom. You have to hold their attention and relate to them (but not too much, or you'll be admonished for being unprofessional or inappropriate). Every once in awhile, you'll walk around and see the lewd things students write (about you or each other) on the edges of the desks in fits of boredom, wondering whether you should clean it off, eventually not caring. You watch their interactions: the blossoming relationships and changing friendships, but also the harsh jokes and insults that you're not supposed to stop because then the kids will never learn to stand up for themselves. If you're good at what you do, they'll like you. They might even feel like they can talk to you when they need something, but you have to be careful about that, too, because the school has rules about what you can talk about with the kids before you have to clam up.

Every once in awhile, you'll get into the situation of having one or two students (or, if you're a twentysomething coach with muscles and a bright smile, eight or ten) who have a crush on you. I'm fairly sure the authority-figure attraction has been going on since the dawn of time (or at least the dawn of organized education), but we still don't have an exact science for dealing with it. Technically, if we become aware of it, we're supposed to pretend we're not. It usually passes.

"Usually" being the operative word.

Once upon a time, I had a student who was the exception to the rule. I had taught her when she was in junior high, though we met again later. She was that "tenth" person in the "nine-times-out-of-ten." A statistician would call her the "outlier." I knew her for nearly seven years.

I like to tell my classes seemingly-irrelevant stories to illustrate certain concepts. Occasionally, a student will ask for "one of my stories." Well, for awhile, "her story" and "my story" became "our story."

This is that story.

I had taught at West Hardings Junior High for fifteen years when I decided it was time for a change. One can only teach crazy, hormonally-driven preteens for so long, you know? I had been toying with the idea of moving up to high school for awhile, and that year, a position opened at Warren G. Bancroft High, a magnet school a few miles from the junior high. It was the oldest high school in the county, founded in the 1920s. It sat in the middle of downtown, in an area where the city's old money and nouveau-riche paid far too much for their houses and drove their BMWs to buy their designer coffees and bagels before heading to the office. Most of the kids who went to the school were from these families. They would drive expensive cars and wear designer clothes and try to pay for their grades. The girls would have highlighted hair and perfect manicures; the boys would talk about their country clubs and yachting with their fathers. However, with the job came the guarantee that I wouldn't have to teach in a trailer

classroom. So, I took it. I would be teaching world history and AP European History, and had one study hall class each semester.

The week before school started, I was furnishing my classroom with the little touches that made it mine (a fake skull that I used when I taught a Shakespeare elective; a styrofoam-and-papier-machê Parthenon that one of my students had made several years past; and my "Gossip-Free Zone" poster, among other things). The assistant principal in charge of such things (a severe-looking woman in no-nonsense shoes who didn't smile once) had briefed me on the school's no-tolerance-cell-phone-policy, tardy policy, hall pass policy, and dress code. She also handed me a procedure manual the size of a textbook that I was to "familiarize myself with," which I relegated to the bottom drawer of my desk as soon as she left.

I was setting up my computer on my desk when I heard a knock at my (open) door. I looked up to see a guy with close-cropped gray hair in a The Who t-shirt and jeans. (Being that no students were present that week, most of us had come dressed fairly casually.) I thought idly that if his hair were longer and curly, his face would resemble the sort you saw on ancient Roman statues.

"Hey. You the new guy?"

I stood and went over to shake his hand. "Yeah. Alan Eldridge."

He smiled. "Grant Aulden." He gave the room a cursory glance. "You're in the Humanities department too, I take it?"

"Yeah. AP European History and World History. You can come in, if you want." I went back to my desk to finish with the computer.

He made a face. "Ugh. I had to teach World for a couple of years. It's almost all freshmen. Good luck," he said, sitting down at one of the desks.

"Thanks," I replied.

"Getting settled in okay?" he asked.

"Yeah, I think so. I haven't really talked to many of the other teachers. The assistant principal was up here earlier, though."

"The kind of bitchy-looking one? Jenkins?"

"Yeah."

He gave a short bark of laughter. "No one likes her, even the other assistant principals. She wants to be principal more than anything, but old man Smythe won't lay down and die."

I laughed. "So," I said, changing the subject, "what do you teach?"

"U.S. History and a Civil War elective. I'm down at the end of the hall on the left," he gestured. "This floor's all Humanities, except for 304, which is one of the art rooms, and farther down is the cooking class. If you pass by toward the end of the period, they might feed you," he advised. "First period in late fall is usually prime pancake time."

We talked for a bit longer, Grant bringing me up to date on school politics, which teachers to avoid, which ones were friendly, and so on. After awhile, a pretty woman with short brown hair and sparkling blue eyes, wearing paint-spattered overalls and Birkenstocks, stuck her head in.

"Well, Grant Aulden, I thought I heard you in here," she said brightly, with a pronounced Southern drawl, crossing the room. "Hey there! You must be new."

I sighed inwardly. I forgot what it was like to be "the new guy," which you always remained until someone else was hired.

"That's me," I said, and introduced myself again.

"Well, I'm Sarah Jean Thomas, you can call me Sarah." She shook my hand. "I'm the crazy one," she added in a faux-confidential whisper, waggling her eyebrows.

I laughed. "I don't know, you might have some competition for that title now that I'm here," I said.

"You're on, mister," she said, grinning.

Grant stood, looking at the school-issued black-and-white clock above my markerboard. It was almost one. "You guys up for lunch?" he asked. "There are a few good places within walking distance," he told me.

"Sure," I said.

"I'll come with y'all. Come on back to my room so I can grab my purse," Sarah said.

Grant and I followed her, closing the door to my classroom behind us. We went into a large room about halfway down the hallway with rows of tables, wooden stools, a few sinks, and a whiteboard at the front of the room. Cabinets ran almost the full length of the far wall. A girl stood at the cabinets, stocking them with bottles of paint from a cardboard box next to her.

"Hey, Laura, come over here. Alan, this is Laura Jones. She's a senior, she's interning with me this year," she said, grinning with pride.

As she put her arm around the girl, I felt my eyes widen in recognition as the girl's did the same.

She opened and closed her mouth a few times in what looked like enough shock to mirror my own. Finally, she settled on a grin so thrilled as to look almost manic. "We've met, but it's been awhile," she said. She pushed her glasses up on her nose and held out her hand for me to shake.

I did so, managing a smile of my own. "It's good to see you, Laurie," I said.

"Oh, do y'all two know each other?" Sarah said, smiling in an oblivious mixture of pleasant surprise and confusion and looking from one of us to the other.

I held my smile, but the whole time, I was resisting the urge to groan.

Not again.