

## Nice Guy, No Hope

### Chapter 1

The air inside Mike Donovan's 1996 Honda Civic was freezing. He had an extra jacket on over his sweatshirt, and he could see his breath when he exhaled. He rubbed his morning eye boogers away and yawned. Mike badly wanted to turn the car on and defrost his limbs, but he knew that was out of the question. It would have looked a little obvious if his car was running but not going anywhere, and he preferred to stay unnoticed. He sat there and rubbed his hands together hoping not to freeze, and waited.

Mike didn't tell anyone about this morning ritual, not even his best friends, because even he knew how it looked. The jokes and humiliation that his buddies would pour on him wasn't worth the relief of getting a big secret out of your chest. He munched on a cold pop tart and waited. It was 45 minutes until school started at McNeil High, a place Mike dreaded with a passion. It was his senior year, but it felt like he was on year ten of a life sentence. There was no reason to get to school early, and the best excuse he'd found to delay was walking out her front door.

Slouching down in his seat so as to not be seen, Mike positioned himself so that he could see through part of his steering wheel and out the front windshield. He had considered bringing binoculars to get a better look, but he surmised he'd have to start making fun of himself then.

Two doors down, walking from her front door to her Volkswagen Beetle, was Monica Callaway. For the next 15 seconds Mike Donovan was on top of the world. At school there would be a hundred guys watching her and wanting to talk to her, but every morning just after 7:30 am, it was Mike and Monica, and nobody else.

For the last nine years the Callaway family had lived within shouting distance of Mike's house. Ever since Mrs. Walsh's 3rd grade class they had attended the same schools together.

For his ninth birthday that year there was only one person Mike cared about inviting: Monica Callaway. Mike didn't remember what presents he got that year, but it didn't matter. The girl of his dreams, who was now a woman, had been inside his house, and willingly too.

*She hasn't been back either! In 3rd grade she knew what a loser you were going to be. Being cool didn't even matter yet and you STILL couldn't hook it up. Way to go Mike.*

The whole thing was just depressing.

Monica walked to her car with her cute over-the-shoulder bag and her purse cradled under her arm. Today her blond hair was up in a bun the way Mike liked it. She was still amazing with it down or in pig tails the way she did sometimes, but he thought you could see her face better this way. Mike didn't understand how some men called themselves "butt guys" or "boob guys." Mike was a sucker for a pretty face, and Monica Callaway had the prettiest on the planet.

She opened the passenger side door and dropped her stuff on the seat. As she walked around the front to the other side she glanced down the street in Mike's direction. Thoughts of jumping out and yelling "HI!" ran through his brain, but sinking farther down in his seat took fewer guts. Monica got in her car and left for school.

As quickly as it had come it was gone. He sat up and brushed pop tart crumbs off his lap. Mike turned the key and the ignition fought the cold and started. He knew she'd be at school when he got there, but it wasn't the same. She would be with her friends, and Mike would be with his. Those groups were as separate as they could be, like two different worlds inhabited by very different species. His species didn't even speak the same language as the hot girls species. He'd get to see her and steal one-sided glances during photo and English, but they wouldn't talk to each other, at least not on purpose.

As Mike drove away he rationalized his morning routine. To some, including Monica Callaway if she knew, he probably looked like a stalker. Mike knew he'd never make the class

favorites page in the yearbook, but he wasn't crazy, and definitely not a stalker. Mike told himself he was just practicing for a future career in the CIA or FBI. It was like stakeout practice.

*I bet they don't stake out hot chicks that they've been obsessing over for almost 10 years.*

Mike begrudgingly agreed with himself. He floored the gas pedal and felt better.

## Chapter 2

"Don't forget, your final essay on Macbeth is due tomorrow," Mrs. Hale hollered after her 4th period class. The bell had rung, and although they were still physically in her classroom, her seniors had already moved on to lunch.

Mike walked out to the quad clutching the draft of his Macbeth essay.

"Lined paper, and especially that which pertains to all things educational, is strictly forbidden at lunch time!"

Mike looked up and saw Adam Magana standing on their table. "It's senior year man, put that crap away," Adam quipped.

Adam and Mike had been good friends for years, but hard work and school were two things that Adam hated. He wasn't a loser, but he still thought C's were good enough, and B's and A's meant you were trying too hard.

Mike was frustrated, and unlike Adam he actually cared about his grades. "Mrs. Hale thinks I'm interpreting the symbols too literally. I don't understand what the point of writing something is if nobody can understand it."

"Right," Adam replied. "I have no idea what *you* just said."

Jackson was crossing over to their table with food piled high in his arms.

"You got me *two* hot pockets right?" Adam questioned. "I told you at snack I wanted *two*."

"Yes, yes," Jackson assured him. "For all this hassle I should get a fat tip."

"Thanks man." Mike put his Macbeth draft away and took his food from Jackson. The guys had an arrangement in place. Jackson had PE right before lunch, so earlier in the day Mike and Adam both put in orders and gave him money. The three of them were good friends, and they looked out for each other.

"Where's Marly?" Jackson asked.

Marly was Adam's girlfriend. It puzzled Mike that Adam had a girlfriend, but he and Jackson couldn't even get a phone number. None of them were ugly by any means, just average looking guys, but Adam had a very *strong* personality. Mike decided that was just a nice way of saying he could be a jerk sometimes.

"She's probably hanging out with her hot friends," Adam gloated. A couple of her friends were cute Mike decided, but they were no Monica Callaway.

Jackson chewed his pizza. "I bet they're talking about their underwear."

"Yeah, I bet they are," Adam agreed.

"I was being sarcastic horn dog," but this was lost on Adam. He was still thinking about their underwear.

"So either of you fools gonna get a date for Homecoming? Marly wants another couple to double date with."

Homecoming was three weeks away, and neither Mike nor Jackson had girlfriends, or dates for that matter. They were both nice guys, they just hadn't found their Marly yet.

"Barring any miracles, that would be a big fat NO," Mike said. The last girlfriend Mike had was freshmen year, and that lasted for a couple weeks. They never actually broke up, but summer had rolled around and they just stopped talking. Mike wondered if technically they were still together.

"Neither of us have girlfriends," Jackson pointed out. "Unless you know some girls looking for two guys like us, I think we're out of luck."

"You could actually try talking to a girl, that's how it usually starts." Ever since Marly, Adam had become a girl expert.

"We talk to girls," Mike said, "but I doubt any of them want to

go to Homecoming with us."

"Macbeth and ions and all that boring mumbo jumbo isn't talking. Well it is, but nobody cares. I mean really talk to a girl, ask her out, hook it up!" Adam was quite the inspirational speaker.

Mike considered this. The thought of approaching a girl that he never talked to and asking her out was frightening. The anxiety, the nervousness, and the ultimate rejection would be humiliating. Besides, there was only one girl he wanted to go with.

"You could ask Monica Callaway," Jackson suggested. The guys knew Mike was sweet on her. That hadn't been a secret since Junior High.

"She doesn't even know I exist."

"Yes she does," Adam spoke up. "She just doesn't care."

"Shut up." Jackson glared at him. He turned back to Mike, "Just because you guys don't talk much doesn't mean you're invisible."

"And what would I say to her? 'Hey Monica, remember me? You came to my birthday in 3rd grade, and every year after that we grew farther and farther apart, and you probably don't even know who I am now. Wanna hook up?' Yeah, like that's going to happen." Mike may have been infatuated with Monica since elementary school, but he knew well enough that's all it would ever be. She was out of his league, and he'd accepted this a long time ago.

"Or you could try sounding *not* like a psychopath," Adam insisted. "'Hey Monica, want to go to Homecoming?' would work."

Mike thought about it. What did he have to lose? He could ask her, she would say no, and he'd go on being a single lonely senior. At least Adam would leave him alone. But there was something comforting about not asking her. Mike had never put himself out there, and Monica had never shot him down. If he asked her though, and she said no, that thin strand of hope he was holding onto would be broken. It was easier to go on kidding himself.

"I'll find something better to do, I hate dancing anyways," Mike conceded. The bell rang.

Adam picked his stuff up to head to class. "OK, but if you change your mind I'll talk to Marly. She might not be able to get you one of the really hot ones, but maybe one of the kinda hot ones. I think Sheryl just broke up with her boyfriend."

"Thanks Adam, you're so thoughtful."

Mike walked to class and only thought of Monica Callaway. Her wavy blond hair and perfect smile filled his mind. He didn't even know how to dance, but Mike decided he could suffer through it if he was dancing with her. Even she could make that experience a good one.

He plopped down in Calculus and came back to reality. If Monica's type was average looking guys with a bookish disposition, Mike had a feeling he'd have heard that by now. Mike decided Homecoming and all things associated were overrated. He put those thoughts out of mind and took out his homework. Mike started feeling better.

### Chapter 3

Mike plopped into his seat in photo 1. It was the beginning photo class, and Mike was taking it as an elective his senior year. He didn't want to be a photographer, but it beat writing poetry or singing in musical theatre.

For the last couple days since Adam had brought it up, all Mike could think about was Homecoming. Adam had planted a seed and put crazy ideas about taking Monica Callaway into Mike's head. His morning ritual of "delaying" his departure for school was even more intense than it used to be. She was no longer the hot girl that was totally out of reach. Now she was the hot girl that was totally out of reach but would look smokin' in a Homecoming dress.

Photo class was especially torturous. Monica was oblivious to Mike, even though they sat only a few chairs away from each other. This normally would have been a major turn off to Mike. Girls that are full of themselves, regardless of how hot

they are, are a waste of time. Mike knew Monica was different though, and he blamed himself for never even attempting a conversation.

"Assignment #7 on shadows is due in two and a half weeks. That's the Friday before Homecoming." Mr. Barry stood behind his podium in jeans and a collared shirt. "If you finish that early you can go back and redo any previous project. Got it? Get to it!"

Mike found his negatives hiding in the madness living inside his notebook. He'd taken some pictures of Jackson standing outside his house at sunset. His shadow stretched all the way to the end of the street like a giant, albeit a very skinny one. Mike picked a couple different shots to develop, and he hoped at least one of them turned out decent.

The darkroom always smelled a little off. The stop bath gave off a pungent vinegar odor, and the open liquids made the air feel damp. A single red safelight provided the only light in the dim room. A couple other students were busy with various stages in the photo developing process. Mr. Barry had also rigged a radio to play in the darkroom, so it was never uncomfortably quiet.

Mike exposed his prints and headed over to the developer. He dipped his paper into the bin and daydreamed. Monica Callaway had practically taken up residence in his mind, and she was there front and center as he drifted away.

Mike had decided there were two kinds of guys in the world. For some, they need only look at a girl, and they would swoon from all corners of the globe. For them, Homecoming was a glorious occasion. Adam probably assumed he was in this category, but Jackson had said Marly was a fluke.

Then there were guys like Mike. They weren't ugly or weird, and unlike the guys on daytime TV, women didn't want to kill each other to be with them. Mike called himself and other guys like him a "hard sell." Eventually they ended up with a girl and got married, but it took a whole lot of convincing. Girls weren't going to drool over Mike's body or golden locks. Whenever he

would find the girl for him, it would be because of who he was as a person. His personality and convictions were his strong points, but girls couldn't see this from across the quad. The problem was getting a girl close enough that she could witness them for herself.

*Maybe you should go on Oprah and cry your eyes out, that would be really sexy.*

He went back to tending his photo project.

Mike picked up his photos and slapped them down in the stop bath. As he did this the girl next to him started splashing the stop bath around with the tongs.

"Whoa, cut it out. That stuff wreaks havoc on the clothes." The idiocy of fellow classmates drove Mike nuts.

But instead of stopping it got worse, and Mike realized she wasn't screwing around, she was in pain.

It was hard to tell what was wrong in the poor lighting, but Mike could hear her gasping for air. She fell to the floor and the tongs rattled away, and at that moment the seriousness of the situation donned on Mike.

"Somebody turn on the lights, now!" Mike moved over to the girl on the floor to see what was wrong. Someone flipped the switch and the room was filled with white light.

Mike was hunched over Julia Sanchez, a fellow senior at McNeil. Her hands were pulling at the skin around her neck, like there was a clamp squeezing her windpipe shut. Mike sprung into action.

"Someone call 911, she can't breathe!"

Mike had never taken a CPR class, but he'd watched enough TV to get the main idea. His mom was an RN, and she always criticized the actors if she didn't approve of their form. Tilt the head back, close the nose, and breathe into the mouth. For a second Mike looked up to see who else was there, and hoped someone might push him out of the way and say "I'm a doctor, move!"

No one did.

He breathed into her mouth, but couldn't tell if it was

working. She wasn't breathing on her own at all now. For the next 8 minutes Mike performed CPR on Julia, or at least something very close to real CPR. When the paramedics arrived and took over Mike was glad to be relieved of his responsibility. He hoped he hadn't screwed up too bad and the paramedics would still have a chance.

They put a breathing mask over her mouth and gave her a couple shots. As they wheeled her out of the darkroom there was mention that it was most likely an allergic reaction, but she would probably pull through with no problem.

The adrenaline was still pumping through Mike's blood as he stood in the darkroom. He now realized how short of breath he had become trying to breath for two people. He looked up and saw a few classmates standing around looking scared to death, and Mike hoped none of them needed CPR. Mr. Barry stood there also and looked white as milk. Mike turned around to see who else was there, and that's when he saw her, hand still on the light switch.

It was Monica Callaway.

She looked as surprised and shocked as the rest of them, but that wasn't what grabbed Mike's attention. He had seen Monica on many occasions, but this was different. He wasn't just looking at her, she was looking at him.

"You saved her life Mike," Monica said.

*She said your name!*

"What? Uh, I don't know, she just needed help, I guess..."

"No, you did. If you hadn't known CPR she'd be dead," Monica insisted.

"Well, I don't really know CPR, I've just seen..."

As Mike began his explanation he was interrupted. Someone behind him had started clapping, and within a few seconds everyone else in the darkroom had joined them. It wasn't until now that Mike started to consider his efforts and that they might have been a little heroic.

He looked back towards the light switch, lightheaded from the lack of oxygen and unsure that Monica had actually been

there. She was there, still the prettiest girl on Earth, and she was clapping with the rest of them.

Mike watched as a smile crept across the lips of Monica Callaway, intended solely for him.

## Chapter 4

By the next day Mike Donovan had become a small-time celebrity at McNeil. Apparently when you save a girl's life word spreads like wildfire. People Mike didn't even know were approaching him and complimenting him on a job well done. Mike welcomed the kind words, but he didn't consider his actions extraordinary. He was just an average guy put into an extraordinary situation, and other people would have done the same thing in his place.

At lunch it was all Adam and Jackson could talk about.

"What's up super CPR life saving dude?" Adam was his usual jovial self.

"Stop calling me that, I'm not a hero."

"Heck yes you are, take some credit for once in your life," Adam said in his motivational speaker voice. "You're Mike Donovan, life-saving hero and available bachelor!"

Jackson patted him on the shoulder. "Way to go man. From what people are saying it sounds like you really *are* a hero, whether you think so or not. Wish I could have seen you in action."

"Thanks, but it wasn't a big deal. I didn't even think about what I was doing, a voice just told me to move, so I did."

"Not only are you a hero," Adam mumbled through a mouth full of cheeseburger, "but you're humble too! You could be the next Mother Teresa or something."

"Thanks for the advice. I'll keep it in mind."

Marly walked over and slid in next to Adam, giving him a big hug and almost spilling his drink. Marly was cute, and a nice girl, but it was puzzling trying to figure out what she had seen in Adam. Apparently there had been something. Whether

Adam was aware that he had struck gold, Mike wasn't sure.

"Way to go Mike!" Marly said as she jabbed at his arm. "A bunch of girls were talking about you last period. It looks like you've made quite the impression on people."

"Thanks, I guess that's good to hear."

"It's OK to take a little credit" Jackson assured him, "after all, you deserve it."

As Mike finished off his soda he felt a tapping on his shoulder. He turned to see who it was that wanted his attention. Standing in front of him, leaning with her weight on one leg and book bag over her shoulder, was Monica Callaway.

His first thought was that he'd drifted into the wrong part of the quad, but he realized he hadn't moved. Mike now understood the saying "a deer in headlights." He couldn't move, and he didn't think his brain was capable of forming a complete sentence. Lucky for Mike she was ready to do most of the talking.

"Hey Mike." She smiled as she said this, and it was intoxicating. "I never got a chance to say congratulations yesterday. What you did, helping Julia and all, it was, well, amazing."

Mike concentrated as hard as he could, making sure nothing completely idiotic came out of his mouth. "Thanks, I couldn't have done it if you hadn't turned on the lights, you know, light switch girl!"

*Light switch girl? She's not wearing spandex in a comic book you idiot. Maybe you should tell her you want to make babies with her so she'll leave and end this humiliation.*

"Well, they were right next to me, that was the easy part." She brushed the hair from in front of her eyes as she glanced down to the ground. Her cheeks turned red. "Anybody could have done that."

Mike smiled for the first time in the conversation. He realized she wasn't here talking to him as part of a mandatory thank Mike for saving a life program. Monica had left her group of friends, walked across the quad, and found Mike amidst the

crowd of students just to talk to him.

*Thank you whoever put Monica Callaway in Photo 1.*

"Yo yo yo, what's up Monica!" Adam hollered. Mike was jerked back to reality.

"Hey everybody," Monica said as she waved hi to the others. She sat down next to Marly on the picnic bench, and chatted for the remainder of lunch. Mike was still in shock that Monica Callaway was actually there, talking to him and his friends. It was a surreal feeling, like a perfect daydream, but without the hazy foggy feeling.

The bell rang to head back to class. Marly gave Adam a peck on the cheek and hopped off to her next period. Adam and Jackson both said goodbye and went their separate ways. Mike turned to head to class, and Monica was still standing there.

Mike would have had no problem living out the rest of his days perpetually having lunch with Monica Callaway, but unfortunately time had moved on. The clock was ticking towards the end of the best lunch ever.

"Guess we better get to class," Mike said with hesitation.

"Yeah, I suppose so." Why Monica hadn't just runaway when the bell rang, Mike didn't know.

Monica stood there with Mike and felt butterflies in her stomach. She had known Mike for years, but her experience yesterday in the darkroom made her question how well she really knew him. Since then she had grown curious. She likened the feeling to someone like Lois Lane discovering Clark Kent's secret. Mike hadn't changed, but her perception of him had. Before Mike had been the same guy he was since third grade, but now there was a sort of mystery about him. She was curious now.

The entire lunch period she had put off doing that which she came over to do in the first place. She felt a rock in her throat as she scrounged up the courage to speak. She blurted out the words before they were lost forever.

"What are you doing Friday?"

"Um, I'm not sure exactly, I think I might..."

"We should go out! With my friends I mean, and you could bring yours. We never really get to talk, so you know, it might be fun."

For a second Mike thought he had heard wrong. Not only was Monica talking to him, but now she was suggesting they continue talking beyond this conversation.

"Yeah," was all he could come up with, still stupefied from the entire turn of events.

*"Yeah"? The girl of your dreams is asking you out, and that's all you've got? How about sounding like you're actually interested!*

"I mean yes, definitely. That sounds like a lot of fun."

As she turned to walk away, her hand slipped into the back pocket of her jeans. When it came back out it held a small piece of paper she had prepared earlier. Monica held the piece of paper out and offered it to Mike with a coy smile. Then she said two of the best words a guy could ever hope to hear.

"Call me."

Mike reached up and took the paper. Monica hurried off to class leaving Mike standing in the quad, clutching what might have been the long lost Holy Grail. The bell for next period rang making Mike officially tardy. He had failed to notice though. The cloud on which he was now standing was miles above the earth. It would be another couple minutes and the yelling of a security guard before he came back down.

## Chapter 5

After about an hour of staring at Monica's phone number, Mike found the courage to pick up the phone and dial. The conversation was brief, and for this Mike was grateful. Monica said the plan was to meet at The Coffee Hut at around 7 pm tomorrow. The Coffee Hut was a local coffee shop in town that hosted different musicians on the weekend. Usually they were unsigned bands or solo acts that had yet to be discovered. It

was popular to grab a cup of coffee and sit for a few hours and listen to music on a Friday or Saturday night. Monica said her friend Jen was coming, and Mike was welcome to bring some friends. He gave a cheery "Sounds great! See ya then," and hung up before she changed her mind.

While lying in bed and staring at the ceiling, Mike considered how to classify his Friday night plans. Without a doubt, part of him wanted it to be a date. This side of Mike's thought process argued she had given him her phone number after all, and that definitely counted for something. The more cautious side though suggested that she had invited various third parties to also attend, and this made it a friendly group outing, not a date. Regardless of any symbolic title, Mike was nervous as all get out.

Friday rolled by slower than a Grandma in a Cadillac. Mike didn't particularly want his friends to come that night, but if Monica was inviting friends, he thought he should do the same. The thought of being alone with Monica Callaway was frightening enough, but being outnumbered was probably worse.

After school Mike checked in with his accomplices. Jackson had to baby sit his little sister Emily, so he was out. Marly and Adam were free though, and they were game. Mike told them the plan was to meet at The Coffee Hut at 7, and Marly said they'd meet him there. Mike asked Marly to make sure Adam didn't act like a total fool. "Don't worry," she assured him, "I'll keep him under control. See you in a bit."

Mike started getting ready a couple of hours before he was supposed to show up. His attention to detail was immaculate. Every hair on his head was in place, and each armpit was wearing several layers of deodorant. Mike was going to do everything in his power to make sure the night went smoothly. Mike was so anxious he ended up arriving at The Coffee Hut a full half-hour early. Inside a few people were reading and sipping coffee, but it wasn't packed yet. He ordered a vanilla latte and grabbed a table. The music wouldn't start until 8, but

by then it would be a full house. Mike kept an eye on the door, and waited.

Monica and Jen pulled up to The Coffee Hut a little after 7. Before they got out Jen looked at her.

"You ready?"

"Yes, I am," Monica insisted. "Now can you stop making me more nervous than I already am?"

"Sorry," Jen said and zipped an imaginary zipper over her lips. "Let's get some coffee, and have some fun."

Monica wasn't sure why she felt so jittery. She was used to seeing Mike Donovan in a certain way, and this new view was confusing. Monica liked what she saw, but it was unfamiliar. She wondered if Mike felt the same.

They grabbed their purses, and Monica and Jen made their entrance.

The Coffee Hut was definitely hip. It had the feel of a Starbucks meets a club. The lighting was dim and gave the place a very intimate feeling. When the girls walked in Mike was already sitting at a table. Marly and Adam had already arrived and joined him. When Mike saw them he waved them over.

"Hey ladies!" Adam squealed. Marly pinched him so hard he gave out another yelp and almost fell out of his seat. He gave Marly a crazed look. "I mean *HI*."

"Hey there," Jen said. "Good table."

"I got here a little early," Mike said. "You two want to sit down? Or do you want some coffee? Because you could get that now, if you want, unless you'd rather sit down..."

Adam cut off his babbling with a swift kick under the table.

"You look like cappuccino ladies, am I right?" Adam guessed.

Monica nodded. "That sounds great, thanks."

Adam got up to order. As he did Marly pinched his butt in approval.

Jen sat down next to Marly, and Monica realized she'd done so on purpose. The only seat left was next to Mike. Jen smiled

in no particular direction and started talking to Marly. Monica took the seat next to Mike and hung her purse on the chair. Adam came back with drinks and the five talked about all sorts of things. They talked about where they wanted to apply for college, about the caffeine in the coffee, and about other music they'd seen at The Coffee Hut.

Beneath the table Mike's fingers were crossed. So far, so good.

Around 8 o'clock the first act was setting up his guitar, and it was standing room only.

"Good thing you got a table," Monica said to Mike, "or my legs would be aching."

"Yeah," Mike nodded. "Thanks for asking me out, here, for coffee I mean. Usually I'm just Marly and Adam's third wheel."

Monica grinned sheepishly. He came across as a little shy she thought, but he was thoughtful too. "You're welcome," she told him. "What you did the other day, it threw me for a loop. Are you the same Mike Donovan that broke his arm jumping off the swings in elementary school?" Monica teased playfully.

"I think so." Mike was surprised she remembered. "Except I stopped jumping off swings last year."

This made Monica giggle, and even Mike chuckled at his lame joke. The nervousness they both felt began to melt away.

As the musician introduced himself and began playing Mike took a deep breath. For the next hour or two the pressure of conversation would be lifted. In the softly lit room Mike glanced back at his "maybe" date.

Monica Callaway was beaming.

## Chapter 6

Two different musicians performed. The first was a young guy with a guitar. He was entertaining and upbeat, and the crowd loved him. The second was a woman on a keyboard. She was mellow, and much more laid back than stuff Mike

usually listened to. Considering his situation though, Mike had found it a little romantic.

When the music was over, most of the crowd slowly made their way out.

"I think we're gonna bail," Marly said, "but we should do this again sometime." Adam reached across the table to high five Mike.

As Marly and Adam began their exit, Jen stood up too.

"Hey Mike, don't you leave really close to Monica?" Jen asked.

"Yeah, just a couple doors down..."

"You mind taking Monica home? I'm running a little late. The last thing I need is my dad on my case."

Mike shrugged. "I guess, as long as Monica is OK with..."

"Awesome! Thanks Mike!"

Monica scowled at Jen. Her plan was obvious, but it had worked. Jen smiled proudly and waved as she left.

Monica turned back to Mike and gave an embarrassed smile. "I think we've been setup."

"I think so," Mike agreed, watching the others leave in the parking lot. "Hope it's not a problem."

"No, it's fine," Monica assured him. "Besides, I know where you live." She winked playfully.

Mike smiled. He exhaled for what seemed like the first time all night.

Monica and Mike left The Coffee Hut and stepped out into the frigid night air. Up above a thousand stars were watching them.

Mike motioned to his car. Conversations with his dad crept out of his subconscious and guided him. Mike had heard the story of how his dad wooed his mom a hundred times, and they were always full of "woman" advice.

He approached the passenger side door and opened it first. Monica smiled in approval and got in.

As Mike got in the other side he realized just how sad his car was. It was well past its prime, but it was reliable. Mike

turned the key and glanced over at his gorgeous cargo. He had never realized how ugly his car was until this moment. The sheer beauty of Monica Callaway put the rest of his car to shame. It's like an art class where you think your painting looks decent, until you put it next to a good one. Monica was so perfect it made his car look like a Pinto. Mike's dejected Honda Civic pulled out of the parking lot and headed home.

"At least you know where I live," Monica said looking on the bright side of their setup.

"True, you don't have to worry about."

"What *do* I need to worry about then?" Monica teased.

Simply being in Monica's presence made him uncomfortable enough. Questions like that only compounded his uneasiness.

*You need to worry that I'll do something stupid like try and kiss you. Don't hot girls know what they should be worried about?*

"Nothing of course. Except I might not have any CDs you like."

Monica reached down and found his wallet full of CDs. She thumbed through the contents with great interest, like they were a small glimpse into who this stranger Mike Donovan really was. The last CD struck her as an odd choice.

"Why do you have 'N Sync?" she asked.

Mike had forgotten about that CD. He moved into damage control mode. "Well, I got it for free, but I guess it's a little catchy." Mike gave a half smile and looked at Monica to see what she thought.

Monica smiled and leaned over to him. Mike suddenly found it much more difficult to concentrate on driving.

In a whisper Monica said "It can be our little secret." Both of them couldn't help but laugh at this. Monica pulled the CD out and put it in. The sound of high pitched male voices filled the car.

As Mike turned down their street he was snapped back into panic. He'd been having so much fun on the ride home he had done zero strategizing. His dad always stressed how important

the end of a date was. "You can charm her the whole night," he lectured, "but screw up the end and that's all she'll remember."

*Whatever you do, don't screw it up!*

It seemed weird parking the car a few doors down from his own house. The myriad of choices Mike now had to make were daunting.

*If I leave the car running, it looks like I'm eager to get rid of her.*

*If I turn the car off, it looks like I'm expecting a long talk when she probably just wants to leave.*

*If I walk her to the door then it looks like I want a goodnight kiss.*

Mike's hand rested on the keys as he tried to come to a decision.

Monica had thoroughly enjoyed their evening at the coffee shop. Adam and Marly were both a lot of fun, and she was beginning to realize that Mike Donovan was an all around good guy. When she found the 'N Sync CD, most guys she knew would have puffed up their chest and put on a tough face. She was tired of people pretending to be someone they weren't. Not only did Mike stay true to himself, but he didn't seem to care what other people thought. Monica had not been immediately attracted to Mike physically, but his personality was quickly changing the way she saw him. She realized this and felt a surge of nerves shoot through her spine.

"Guess I better go!" she piped up. "But we should do this again, it was fun."

"Yeah, it was." Mike said. "Thanks for asking me."

"Anytime," Monica added as she got out of the car. "See you around neighbor." Mike could see her white teeth shine in the moonlight. She shut the door and all Mike could do was wave.

He waited until she was all the way inside. Mike leaned back in his chair and closed his eyes. He felt like a giant weight had been lifted off his shoulders. It was like finals week

had drawn to a close. For a whole week you stressed out and drove yourself nuts, but at the end it was almost euphoric. Mike had survived the entire date without saying anything overly stupid or revolting. She even left with a smile.

Mike looked in his rear-view mirror, and put the car in reverse.

## Chapter 7

The ecstasy that accompanied Mike after The Coffee Hut date was mood altering. He had never been so excited and hopeful in his whole life, and the outward effect was undeniable. When he came home that night both his parents knew it had been no ordinary outing. His dad knew that no amount of fun with Adam or Jackson could bring about the love struck demeanor that Mike now wore. Whether it was love or simply hormones running rampant, Mike was flying high on Monica Callaway.

"Hey, go get me a Coke yeah?"

"Adam, you're a big boy, you can get your own coke," Jackson said, not even looking up from his magazine.

"I can't leave the computer, I'm talking to Marly. Just get me one."

"OK," Jackson told him, but when a minute had elapsed without Jackson moving, Adam got up with an "Arg!" and went to the kitchen.

Mike had been unsure what to tell the guys about his night with Monica. Adam had asked him the next day how the drive home went, and Mike had given some positive comments, but he'd left out the really personal feelings. Mike's crush was old news, but divulging his feelings at this stage was a little uncomfortable. Mike was partly afraid to get his hopes up only to be let down again. Any thoughts of winning over Monica had been crumpled up and thrown away years ago, but the recent change of events rekindled those hopes Mike had long given up on. As much as this excited Mike, it scared him too.

Adam slurped on his Coke and click-clacked away on the keyboard. Even though it was Jackson's computer, whenever the guys were over Adam lived on it. Why he didn't just go over to Marly's house, Mike didn't know.

"Marly wants to know who's double-dating with us."

Jackson looked up from his computer magazine at Mike. "As of right now, not me," he said. "But I'm sure there is a line of girls outside waiting to ask me." Jackson's dry delivery annoyed the heck out of Adam. "I think I can hear them now."

"Yeah yeah, whatever," Adam said leaning back in the office chair. "Marly says her friend Jessica needs a date, and she'd rather go with one of you guys than go alone."

"At least she's honest," Mike pointed out.

"Hey Romeo." Adam pushed off the desk and spun around. "Why haven't you asked Monica yet? She let you drive her home, and from what you told me, she actually enjoyed it. What are you waiting for?"

Mike had certainly considered it. From the moment she'd shown an interest it had been on his mind. The only thing that had kept him from calling was fear.

"If I don't call her, she can't say no."

"True," Jackson said in his philosopher voice. "But she can't say yes either."

"I guess there's only one thing to do then!" Adam grabbed the phone off its charger and gave it a toss. Mike caught the phone and stared at it, like his fate was wrapped up inside its technological bits.

"I don't even know what to say to her. Remember, she asked me to go out for coffee, it was her prerogative." Mike was unsure. "Going to homecoming with me is serious."

Jackson held his hands palm up. "Give it a shot. The worst that can happen is she says no."

*Exactly.*

Mike clicked the talk button and dialed slowly. He took a deep breath and closed his eyes.

The most beautiful voice in the world answered. "Hello?"

"Hey Monica, it's Mike."

"Oh hey, what's up?"

"Not a lot, how are you?" Adam rolled his eyes and made a "get on with it" gesture.

"I'm good, just working on a physics project. Hey, thanks for taking me home the other night. That was nice of you."

"That's fine, it wasn't a problem." Adam looked up at the ceiling and got serious. "So there's a reason I called you. I was wondering if you'd like to go to homecoming with me...as my date."

The silence that followed on the other end of the phone seemed to last a lifetime. Thoughts of regret and self-doubt filled Mike's head.

"It's too bad you didn't ask me earlier, but Kelso Baker asked me last week. I told him yes."

The hope and excitement that had been fueling Mike evaporated. "Oh...yeah, that's too bad."

"I'm sorry Mike, otherwise..."

"No it's OK," Mike said, cutting off his former crush. "I understand. I'll see you around," and he hung up the phone.

Mike wanted to cry, but he held it back. This wasn't a new feeling for Mike. Countless times he'd built something up in his mind, only to be crushed when he came plummeting back to reality. His "date" with Monica was a distant memory now. He'd made a fool of himself even imagining that a girl like her would go to homecoming with a guy like him.

*I guess some things will never change.*

## Chapter 8

"I'll take the blue vest, it's flashy," Adam told the clerk at Suit and Tux Galore.

"And what about you sir?" the clerk asked Mike while holding up the selection of vest colors.

"I don't care, you pick."

"The green would look ravishing, or possibly the silver?"

The clerk held each vest up to Mike's chest.

"The silver one. Are we done yet?"

Mike had not taken well to rejection. Over the last few days Kelso Baker had become his mortal enemy, and just the sight of Monica was enough to set him off. Adam and Jackson had started to keep an eye out for her to make sure Mike didn't cross her path.

Being shot down sucked, but there was an underlying feeling of being double-crossed that made Mike sick to his stomach. He thought it was typical of girls, and especially those like Monica. Giving out phone numbers and going on dates was no big deal to them, but they never stopped to consider how their actions affected anyone else. When you're that pretty you can do most whatever you want, or at least that's how Mike felt.

Adam and Mike left the store with their suit reservations and got in the car.

"Thanks for going with Jessica to Homecoming." Adam tried to make it sound positive. "The four of us going out together, it should be fun."

"I can't believe I'm spending over \$100 to go with one of Marly's friends I don't even like. No offense, but I'm not expecting the time of my life."

Mike's attitude had started to grate on everyone around him. Adam understood he was bummed about Monica, and that was to be expected. But lately feeling sorry for him wasn't enough. Mike wouldn't be satisfied until he brought everyone else down with him in a fireball of misery.

"You know, she didn't really have a choice." Adam was annoyed.

"What?"

"Monica, what did you expect her to do? It's not her fault someone asked her before you got all lovey-dovey on her." Adam was determined to talk some sense into him. "She'd already said yes, and you have to accept that."

Mike wasn't comfortable facing reality. "She didn't *have* to

say no. If she really wanted to go with me she could have ditched him. She made a choice, and it wasn't me."

"I don't think it's that simple."

"It doesn't matter."

Monica's reaction had been quite different. While Mike found consolation in his anger, Monica felt like she was put in a difficult situation with no way out. She couldn't undo her plans with Kelso, and she couldn't go with *both* of them. The whole event was supposed to be enjoyable, but lately it was depressing.

"I'm pretty sure Mike hates me now." Monica and Jen were looking at flowers. It was a week before the dance and they were finishing getting ready. "I see him in the hall and he automatically goes a different direction. It's like I've got the plague."

"He probably wishes you did."

"Thanks, you're real supportive." Monica said with a roll of her eyes. "I wish he'd asked earlier. The timing of everything couldn't be worse."

Monica had wanted to say yes to Mike. She wanted to go with him, to find out more about this mysterious guy. She was stuck though. She'd said yes to Kelso Baker two weeks before and made plans already. She couldn't back out on him, not this late in the game.

"Which one do you like?" Monica held up a daisy and a rose corsage.

"I like the daisy, it's sweet." Jen smiled. "I bet Kelso likes you in either."

Monica blushed.

Jen took the flowers and set them down. "Maybe you shouldn't let the whole Mike thing get you down. Kelso Baker is a good looking guy, and you might as well enjoy your last Homecoming dance."

Monica thought Jen had a point. After all, there was a reason she had said yes to Kelso to begin with. He seemed

like a good guy, and he was easy on the eyes. If she was going to the dance with him, she might as well have a good time. Moping about circumstances out of her control was no fun.

"I suppose so. I wanted to go with him before the whole Mike fiasco, and I can still enjoy going with him now."

"That a girl!"

Monica walked out of the flower shop feeling a little more upbeat than when she'd walked in. She wanted to enjoy Homecoming, but it was difficult when her feelings for Mike were still in limbo.

The Thursday before Homecoming Mike was leaving his English 12 class. Mrs. Widmeyer was having them write an essay on Hamlet that was due Monday. The entire class had complained that it was Homecoming weekend, but Mrs. Widmeyer failed to see their plight.

English and photo had wreaked havoc on Mike's sanity. At the quad or in the halls, avoiding Monica was easy. But for these two periods of the day he had to be in the same room with her, and it drove him crazy. His jealousy wanted to yell obscene curse words, but his hormones wanted to kiss her passionately. The mixed signals tore him apart.

As the bell rang Mike got up and made his way out the door. Monica jogged up next to him and cut him off.

"Hey Mike, how's it going?"

They hadn't talked since that day on the phone. Monica knew he was upset, but she thought the silent treatment was a little childish.

"It's OK, nothing too exciting." Mike didn't stop walking. Monica kept pace.

"I know you're mad about Homecoming. I wish things could have been different."

Mike thought about this for a moment and stopped. "I'm not mad," he said, "Just not how I pictured it working out I guess." As much as he wanted to be, it was impossible to be mad at her. But hating Kelso Baker, that was easy.

"Are you going? To the dance I mean." She wasn't sure if he'd asked anyone else or not.

"Yeah, I'm going with one of Marly's friends." To Mike it felt like coming in second place, but he didn't need to tell her that.

"See, things have a way of working themselves out in the end," Monica said with a voice of reassurance. "See you at the dance Mike."

Monica turned and left him standing in the hallway.

*Yeah, see you at the dance making out with Kelso Baker. I can't wait.*

## Chapter 9

Mike cinched his tie and buttoned his jacket. He was hot and itchy already. Mike wondered why you put on heavy clothes to dance in close proximity to hundreds of other sweaty and stinky bodies. He cringed at the thought. Maybe they're for protection he pondered.

Adam waited impatiently in the other room. "Would you hurry up already, we're gonna be late!"

"I'm coming!" Mike shouted back.

Adam's Dad let him borrow the BMW for the night. It wasn't very new and looked past its prime, but it was better than taking their cars. A Limo seemed excessive for only four people, and Mike was in no hurry to impress Jessica. She was a decent looking girl, but there were no sparks, and definitely not worth spending money he didn't have.

Adam glanced at the clock. "The girls should be ready by now, I told them we'd be there by six."

"Since when are girls on time?" Mike said.

Adam was already stressing out. He wanted the night to be perfect, and now his best friend was threatening to pout his way through the whole evening. "Can you stop being pissy at least for one night? Some of us actually want to enjoy ourselves."

"I'm not being pissy," Mike fired back, but he couldn't

elaborate his comeback. Mike knew he was right. Knowing Monica would be there with Kelso, and that he was willingly putting himself in the same room, it was like walking into oncoming traffic. He knew the night would be terrible, and nobody would share his misery.

The guys picked up their dates at Marly's house. They took a few pictures and suffered through the cooing of Marly's mom. Mike was grateful Jessica's corsage was of the wrist variety. The last thing he needed was to stab the date he didn't even want.

"Have a wonderful time," Marly's mom called after them. "Make sure you're home on time!"

"Yes Mom, of course," Marly yelled back.

Mike reached for the passenger door and was interrupted. "Whoa, you're not Adam's date." Marly broke in. "How about you accompany your date, *Jessica*, in the back."

Mike slid into the backseat with a half-hearted smile.

The first stop of their evening was to enshrine the event eternally in a photograph. To Mike it was yet another person reaching into his wallet. Mike didn't understand why he needed to take pictures with Jessica if they weren't even dating. For some reason it was really important to Jessica though, so Mike bit his tongue and went along.

They arrived at the local photographer and found a line of couples waiting their turn. The four of them found the end of the line and waited. After a short while it was Mike and Jessica's turn. They walked in front of the backdrop and stood uncomfortably. The photographer pointed at two small markings on the floor for them to stand on.

Mike and Jessica pressed against each other awkwardly. Touching for the first time in such an intimate settings was strange for both of them. For a moment Mike enjoyed himself. Thoughts unbecoming a gentleman seeped into his mind. In this new and compromising situation Mike looked up to get ready for the picture. Just past the photographer he glanced at

the line of couples waiting their turn. There at the end of the line, having just arrived was Monica Callaway.

Hanging all over her was Kelso Baker.

*Get your hands off her you goon. She's not a piece of meat.*

Before Mike knew it the bulbs had flashed and the picture was done. Mike followed Jessica in a daze towards the exit, right past the rest of the couples in line.

As Monica and Kelso drew closer Mike looked away. He knew she was there, but making eye contact with her would tear him apart.

Monica didn't know what to say to him, but she felt like she had to say something. As he walked by the only thing that came to her mind escaped her lips.

"Hey Mike!" she said, a little more excited than she had planned.

All Mike could muster was a soft "hey" and a wave. Monica watched as he kept walking, never once looking up.

"How do you know that loser?" Kelso asked.

Monica considered her answer to save herself from a lot of explaining.

"Just my neighbor," Monica said calmly.

Adam had made reservations for a fancy restaurant on the way to the dance. The school had rented a ballroom at the downtown aquarium near the ocean. There were lots of trendy places to eat in the crowded area, but Mike figured they were all the same. White tablecloths, candles, and waiters who were overly polite. Mike was grateful his dad had slipped him a \$100 bill before he left the house. He also advised Mike to "Have a good time!" Mike doubted he would, but his dad paying for dinner would certainly help.

The food was better than Mike had anticipated, but he was still hungry after he finished his \$35 fish.

"Isn't it weird that they charge a lot, but hardly give you any food?" Mike complained to the rest of his table. "Seems like a rip-off to me."

## Chapter 10

"I think you're paying for the ambiance," Jessica said trying to cheer Mike up.

He wasn't having any of that. "I can't eat the ambiance." When the check finally arrived his mood went from bad to worse.

Mike knew it was going to be expensive, but it was more than he had calculated.

"Why the heck is it so much?" Mike looked over the bill at the items they had ordered. All the food was listed at the top, but underneath that was one entry repeated fourteen times.

"What is 'BEV'?" he said, and then it donned on him.

Beverage.

"They charged us for every refill!" Mike said. "\$30 for soda?!"

"It's OK Mike," Adam said trying to calm him down. "Let's just pay and go to the dance."

Mike was in shock. They weren't even at the dance yet and the night was a mess.

They arrived at the aquarium and parked the car. Mike had cooled off a bit on the drive over. As he stepped out of the car he noticed the air was crisp and tasted like salt. He took a deep breath calmed down.

*You're here for the next couple hours whether you like it or not. You're here with a girl, it's your last homecoming, and you might as well not screw it up.*

Mike offered his jacket to Jessica. "No thank you," she said, "it's not too bad out here." She appreciated the gesture.

The two couples made their way into the aquarium. The music from the DJ could be heard from the outside.

Mike stood up straight and walked inside, hoping for the best.

The aquarium was near the beach, but was actually situated on a small bay a half-mile inland. During the day it was filled with young schoolchildren on field trips learning about whales and sea urchins. After all the kids had gone home though, it became a convention center of sorts, available for parties and meetings. The McNeil student body had booked their main room for homecoming.

When Mike's group walked into the room the first thing he noticed was the music. In fact it would have been impossible to miss, it was so loud. Mike had been to one semi-formal dance before this one. His sophomore year he took a girl named Rachel to winter formal. Turns out she liked going to dances more than she liked Mike. Besides spending most of the evening sitting alone at a table, Mike remembered the deafening sound of music that defines a High School dance.

They found a table to the side of the dance floor for "home base." The ladies offloaded their purses and Marly took off her heels. Adam and Mike ditched their jackets in the already hot room.

The girls were ready to dance.

Mike didn't understand the appeal of dancing, at least not High School dancing. Not that bouncing to a beat and bumping into each other took much skill, but Mike wondered when you were supposed to learn these skills. He remembered showing up for his first High School dance and feeling completely out of the loop. He'd never danced before, and he never got the memo that he should know how.

"Hey guys" Jessica said enthusiastically, "Let's get our dance on!"

Mike didn't move.

"Come on Mike," Adam pleaded, "It'll be fun."

Mike didn't want to dance, and he'd rather just sit at the table and watch. But he'd made a promise to himself to enjoy the night, and he didn't want to leave Jessica high and dry.

"Alright, what the heck."

When they got to the dance floor Mike considered what an odd social phenomenon this was. The music is too loud to hear someone a foot away, the lights are too dim to see much, the fake smoke being pumped by the DJ is almost suffocating, and all the horny bodies so close together make it downright sweltering.

Mike wasn't sure what he was doing, but he told himself neither did anyone else. Everyone together became a huddled mob moving and bouncing. What bothered Mike was not having something to hold on to. Mike had discovered at the last dance that he actually enjoyed slow dances more than whatever this was called, because you had someone to hold and focus on. The amorphous "let's all dance in a big blob" made Mike feel awkward.

Mike reached out and touched Jessica's hips.

He couldn't even remember making that decision, but Jessica didn't seem to mind. She moved closer to Mike. Having something to hold on to made him feel secure. He knew who he was dancing with, and this he could handle.

Monica and Kelso had arrived at the dance fashionably late. After her awkward encounter with Mike at the photo studio, Kelso had driven her an hour to some fancy restaurant with valet parking. The food was good, but by the time they ate and drove back in the direction of the dance, it was almost half over.

After they got settled Kelso took her hand and escorted her to the dance floor. Monica enjoyed dancing, and she'd actually taken classes and performed when she was younger. Dancing with Kelso was a little strange because they didn't know each other that well. For Monica, standing so close and personal with someone was a fairly intimate situation, and doing that with someone new was hard for her. Apparently it wasn't for Kelso.

He turned out to be very "hands on." Monica never felt violated by any means, but Kelso wanted to dance much

closer to her than she did to him. Most of the evening she found herself pulling back from him. She thought it typical of most guys. There was almost a mob mentality at a dance. Everyone is dancing so close together that you lose some inhibition and do things you normally wouldn't, like try and hold your body against a girl that doesn't want you to. Monica knew the same was true for some of the girls, but they were skanks. Monica had more self-respect than that.

"I'm a little tired," Monica shouted over the rumble of the bass, "I think I'm gonna take a break."

Kelso looked a little disappointed, but instead of leaving with her, he stayed on the dance floor.

Jessica and Mike sat at their table and sipped some punch. He was finally starting to enjoy himself, and he regretted not doing that sooner.

"Sorry I was an ass earlier," he said apologetically.

Jessica was surprised. "Oh, don't worry about it. We're having a good time now, so that's what matters."

Mike liked her positive attitude, and it was rubbing off on him. He had not planned on enjoying his evening, but things were quickly turning around.

Adam and Marly returned from an extended session on the dance floor. They were both out of breath. Mike wondered what exactly they had been doing.

Adam sat down next to Mike and loosened his tie. He covertly elbowed Mike and gestured across the room. Mike looked but wasn't sure what he was looking for. Then he saw her.

Sitting at a table all by herself was Monica Callaway, and she looked beautiful in her dress. He felt a little guilty. As much as he was enjoying his time at the dance with Jessica, his heart longed to be with Monica. It was still painful though to think of how badly everything had gone. His bad timing followed by his childish avoidance gave him a bad taste in his mouth.

Mike's thoughts were interrupted by a break in the music.

"We're gonna take a right quick break from the musical jams," the DJ said speedily. "It's time to find out who will be rocking the last hour of the dance as your Homecoming King and Queen!" Much hollering and cheering rose up from the crowd of students on the dance floor.

Principal Richards walked on stage and took the mic. "Thank you very much Mr. DJ...man..." For Principal Richard's own sake Mike hoped he would stop talking. He continued, "First let's bring up all those nominated."

He proceeded to call the names of all the guys and girls that had been nominated and voted on. The popularity of the nominees made Mike unimpressed, but one of the selections stood out: Kelso Baker. Mike hadn't cared enough to even read his ballot, so seeing him on stage was a surprise. Mike's first inclination was to look for Monica. She'd left her table and joined the crowd at the dance floor to watch the unveiling.

Monica watched from the edge of the crowd as the last nominees made their way on stage. She didn't see the need for a popularity contest. Most of the people on the stage spent all their energy trying to be popular. Why they needed a stamp of approval from the rest of the students was beyond her.

Principal Richards fished a small piece of paper out from his jacket pocket. "Now for the moment you've all been waiting for. This year's Homecoming King and Queen!" Another loud roar from the crowd.

"Receiving the most votes from his group of peers, this year's Homecoming King is..." The Principal paused for dramatic effect.

"Kelso Baker!"

As the crowd applauded and screamed, Monica was a little surprised. She knew Kelso was nominated, but she hadn't thought much about him possibly winning.

After Kelso was crowned the Principal continued. "Joining him as his beautiful queen, with the most votes from her group of peers, this year's Homecoming Queen is...Marina Ramirez!"

The mob yelled and screamed as a shocked Marina Ramirez was crowned. "I present to you this year's Homecoming King and Queen!"

Kelso and Marina made their way down to the dance floor. As they did the crowd of students backed up and formed a large circle around them. Monica watched intently as her date danced with his new queen. Marina was pretty, no doubt. Monica was fairly confident Kelso had noticed.

After a few minutes the DJ invited everyone to join the King and Queen on the dance floor. Monica considered returning to her table, but she was a little jealous watching her date slow dance with another girl. Monica weaved her way towards the center of the crowd to steal back her date and enjoy this dance, but as she approached, something she hadn't expected happened.

When she was only a few couples away, Kelso saw her approaching. He looked at Monica for a moment, and then turned back to Marina. Monica could see him lean in close to his dance partner and say something. Marina gave a small nod. Before Monica could get there, the King and Queen were walking the opposite direction and off the dance floor.

Where they went Monica didn't know.

Monica stood alone on the dance floor amidst a crowd of slow dancing couples. A tear trickled down her cheek. Any positive qualities she had seen in Kelso Baker disappeared in a flash. Monica suddenly felt like all eyes on the dance floor were watching her. In reality nobody else even noticed, but to Monica it felt like everyone knew her date had just left with someone else.

Monica felt like she couldn't breathe amidst the smoke from the fog machine. She turned hurriedly to door and escaped into the night air of the aquarium balcony.

Mike stood at his table watching Monica run out the doors. He didn't know what had happened, but he was willing to bet it was Kelso Baker's fault. He looked back at Jessica still sitting at the table. Before he could say anything she spoke.

"It's OK, go get her Mike."

"I'm sorry tonight didn't turn out very well..." Mike started.

"It turned out just fine," Jessica said with satisfaction.

"Yeah Mike," Adam said, "Now stop wasting time. Go get your girl."

With the group's blessing Mike turned and headed for the balcony. As he walked his pace began to quicken.

His heart was beating even faster.

## Chapter 11

When Mike stepped outside he instantly felt refreshed. The humidity inside had made him sweat incessantly, and the night air outside cooled the perspiration on his brow. There were only a few people outside bearing the cold weather.

Standing at the edge of the balcony watching the water below was Monica Callaway.

Mike hadn't the faintest idea what he was going to say to her. He didn't even know if she wanted to see him after the way he'd treated her the last couple weeks. She might just yell at him to go away, but he had to take that chance.

Mike approached the edge of the balcony and stood several feet away from Monica making sure to give her space. He leaned on the balcony himself. "Pretty view from up here," he said trying to break the ice.

Monica lifted her eyes away from the water and looked at Mike. Her mascara had smeared with her tears.

Mike felt a little awkward, like he'd interrupted something private and he wasn't invited. "I just saw you come outside," he explained, "And I wanted to make sure you were OK."

For a moment Monica didn't move. Mike wasn't sure what her response would be.

A little smile cracked the edge of Monica's lips.

"Thanks Mike, I appreciate it," she said. "Kelso decided he'd rather spend the rest of his evening with Marina, so I'd rather spend the rest of mine out here."

"Oh, I'm sorry." Mike wasn't surprised. Scumbag. "That's a pretty crummy thing to do to a girl at her last homecoming." Monica nodded in agreement.

Mike thought about his own behavior leading up to homecoming. "I guess I shouldn't talk huh?"

"Why do say that?"

"The last couple weeks I've acted like a jerk. I guess when you said no it was easier to just shutdown and avoid you."

"I wish you hadn't. The only reason I came with Kelso was because I had an obligation to." Monica sniffled and rubbed her nose. "I still enjoyed our date."

This startled Mike. It was the first time he remembered Monica referring to their coffee night as a "date." She wiped away some of the last tears that still streaked her face. Even with smudged makeup and a runny nose, Monica was gorgeous.

Monica took a deep breathe and exhaled away the tears. "Thanks for coming out here to cheer me up."

Mike nodded. "It was my pleasure."

From inside the DJ could be heard making an announcement. "After this dance we will be having our last dance of the evening. If you're still waiting to dance with that special someone, now is the time to make your move!"

Mike and Monica watched the water glisten down below the balcony. He felt butterflies creep into his stomach as he considered his next move.

"Monica," Mike said with much hesitation, "would you like to dance?"

She looked up at him and straight into his eyes. "That would be perfect."

Monica stepped back from the edge and held her hand out to Mike.

He took it.

As they walked inside and towards the dance floor the DJ was starting the last dance of the evening, "Everything I Do" by Bryan Adams. It was a slow song, and for this Mike was

grateful. He led Monica out towards the middle of the floor and stopped.

They both stood timidly on the dance floor facing each other. Slowly Mike raised his hands and placed them gently on Monica's waist. Her slender arms reached up and around Mike's neck.

Mike had always liked slow dancing better, and dancing with Monica would forever cement that in his mind. He knew exactly who he was supposed to dance with and pay attention to, and there was no one he would rather be dancing with.

Monica swayed softly back and forth with Mike. She had forgotten Kelso, and here on the dance floor she felt safe. Knowing how things had turned out, Monica wished she had said yes to Mike, and left Kelso out in the cold.

Monica took a step forward closer to Mike. The small gap of unfamiliarity that had separated their bodies disappeared. At first it felt strange and new. She had never been this close to Mike, but after a moment it felt comfortable. Monica held her body against his as they slowly turned and swayed to the beat of the music.

Mike closed his eyes as he held Monica in his arms. He felt the cool skin of her hands resting firmly on his neck behind him. He felt her cheek held close against his own. The moment was perfect. Mike's mind wandered and started to think that the song could be over any minute. He argued with himself to stop or he'd miss the best dance of his life.

Mike inhaled and smelled the vanilla perfume Monica was wearing. It was intoxicating. The entire experience felt like a dream where Mike had no control over his body or anything around him. The urge to kiss Monica Callaway was the strongest it had ever been. Mike reflected on how easy it would be. Their cheeks were touching, and all he had to do was pull back and press his lips against hers. He didn't move an inch though. *Of all the times to daydream you pick now.*

Mike felt the end of the song approaching. It had been so

great while it lasted.

As he reluctantly accepted the final moments of the dance, he felt Monica's cheek move against his. Her skin brushed against his. The softness of her skin was replaced by a new sensation. Monica's lips lightly grazed Mike's cheek as her face turned until they were eye to eye. He could feel the warmth of her breath as her lips waited just beyond his own. The warmth was quickly replaced by a cool feeling. As Monica inhaled she leaned in towards Mike, and her lips came to a rest on his.

For the rest of his life Mike would remember the sweetest taste his lips had ever experienced. At first the kiss was delicate, like they were afraid it was fragile. When they both realized it would not break, their lips continued to kiss with an increasing earnestness. Mike and Monica were lost in their embrace, oblivious to the world around them.

As the song faded Monica slowly came out of her trance. As their lips separated her eyes opened. Mike Donovan looked back at her. The dim light and euphoric kiss made him look amazing. As the dance floor started to empty the two of them didn't move.

Mike didn't know what to say, still in shock from the unexpected events. "That was nice...very...very....nice" he said in a hushed voice.

Monica smiled and bit her bottom lip. "I would have to agree."

Mike and Monica stood on the dance floor in complete elation.

Mike and Monica reluctantly made their way off the dance floor and over to Adam, Marly, and Jessica. Adam wanted very badly to pick his best friend up off the floor and scream wildly. Marly squeezed his hand firmly to prevent any outbursts.

Monica gave a small wave to the others and said hello.

"Is there room in your car for me? My date is probably long gone with my ride home." When Kelso had left he'd taken her

ride with him.

Adam said "You bet there is, and besides, you live really close to Mike."

The ladies gathered up their purses and the guys took their jackets. Mike looked to Jessica for approval. She winked.

The quintet slowly made their way to the exit.

Once they were in the car Mike took a deep breath. The last few moments felt like a dream, but the feeling in his hand told him otherwise. As he looked down he saw the beautiful fingers of Monica Callaway entwined in his own. He looked up, and the face that he saw was more radiant than the moon outside his window.

*Never  
let  
go.*

***The End***