

I put the car in park outside the Blooms's house and thanked the lord I had found a spot on the street. I studied my reflection in the mirror, re-applying lip gloss, checking and re-checking my hair. My mom had helped me with the complex updo now pinned and sprayed onto my head; I was miserable at doing it myself. Danny told me not to dress up, but I wanted to look nice.

Walking up to the door I checked to make sure I'd remembered both earrings, smoothed the creases out of my black skirt and buttoned one more button on my blouse, just to be sure. I rang the doorbell once, taking a deep breath, just then realising I'd forgotten deodorant. I frantically sniffed my armpit, thankful that it was pretty cold out and I wasn't sweating. The door opened, and Danny's father greeted me with a firm handshake and a gentle, guiding hand on my back leading me into their home. Danny ran down the stairs and jumped the last four, landing just feet from me. He tilted his head slightly and smiled a smile you couldn't help but return. He pulled me into his arms.

"I'm so glad we're finally doing this." He whispered in my ear. "So, Pops, this is my girl Casey."

"It's good to finally meetcha, Miss Casey," said his father. It was easy to see where Danny got his charisma from. Chris Bloom was a very charming man, that I could already tell. He was tall, and wore a crisp, light blue shirt. I couldn't stop thinking how young he looked, like there was no way Danny could be his son. Mrs. Bloom came around the corner just then, with chestnut hair flowing down to her waist. She looked older than Mr. Bloom, but was still stunning. She wore a skin-tight, dark purple dress. She wasn't wearing a single piece of jewelry, and she didn't need to.

"You must be the mysterious Casey!" she strode towards me and opened her arms. "I can't believe how long it's taken our Danny to bring you home to meet us!" She hugged me tight and I could feel how hard and muscular her back was. Did the whole frickin' family have to be so perfect?

"It's really nice to meet you both, your home is so beautiful!" I said, remembering what my mom had told me before I left that night: the way to a mother's heart is to compliment her home.

"Thank you, we recently remodeled, actually!"

“Is dinner ready, Hon?” Chris asked as we moved into the dining room.

“Yep, let’s all sit down. Come, Casey, you can sit over here next to Danny.”

“What are we having, mom?”

Mrs. Bloom turned and clasped her hands together, looking almost apologetic. “Well, Casey, I feel you should know right here and now that I’m no Top Chef.”

“Huh, that’s being generous,” joked Chris. “My love,” he added immediately.

“Tonight we’re having beef stroganoff, steamed rice, and brussel sprouts. Do you like brussel sprouts, Casey?” Her concerned eyebrows rose and immediately fell again in relief with my reply.

“Love them!” I said. And it was the truth, I’ve always loved brussel sprouts. Mrs. Bloom clapped once and turned on her heel to get the food. Sitting down at the table I was thankful Danny was in the seat next to me. I let out a sigh and was in the middle of examining my own lap when Danny grabbed my hand under the table. His father announced he had to check the score of the Saint’s game quickly, and we were left alone.

“You doin okay?” Danny asked. I looked over at him. His dark, tousled hair was the same as always, and his warm brown eyes were familiar. I squeezed his hand back and told him I was fine, just a little nervous.

“They already love you, I can tell. It’s just a matter of time until they love you as much as I do.” He leaned in and pressed his lips against mine. I later spent years of my life trying to figure out how a kid his age could kiss so well. I hated thinking of him as a kid. He was 15, but he looked so much older. And he acted so much older. I got all kinds of grief at school for how young he was, but it didn’t bother me. He couldn’t drive, so I had to pick him up and drive him everywhere, but that was a small price to pay for everything he did for me. I’ve never met anyone else that could skyrocket my self esteem the way he did.

“You look so much like your dad, Danny. It’s kinda freaky.”

“I get that a lot actually. It must be the hair,” he said, dramatically flipping his hair with his right hand and letting out that booming laugh of his. I loved that laugh. It was so deep and honest, and unapologetically loud. His mother walked back in with a bowl in each hand, and placed them on the counter.

“Don’t start yet, I know it’s tempting! Where’d your father go?”

“He said he had to check the Saint’s game.”

“CHRIS! Please come back down here, we have company!” she shouted towards the staircase. “That man and his football, I swear he loves that game more than he loves me,” she joked as she hurried back into the adjacent kitchen to grab the steaming beef stroganoff.

Danny gave my hand one last squeeze before releasing it. “I love you, Case.”

“I love you too, Dan.” I said it confidently, because I knew it was true. It had taken me four months to finally say it aloud, but I wanted to be sure I meant it. And I really did. Danny was so much more than just the new lacrosse jock on campus, and he was so much more than his good looks and charm. I met Danny for the first time when he sat next to me during a school volleyball game and just started chatting me up like it wasn’t a big deal. The self confidence that kid has is unparalleled. After a few scattered interactions around school, he walked up to me one day in the hallway, interrupting my conversation with three other senior girls, and asked me to be his girlfriend. Trying not to register the shock and concern on my face, I said I’d let him take me on one date and then I’d see if I wanted to be his girlfriend. I told myself I’d humor the poor freshman and go to lunch with him once and let him down easy. But like only Danny could, he surprised the hell out of me with a unbelievable day, that even now looking back on my time with Danny and my highschool years, I regard it as the best date I’ve ever been on. I let him worm his way into my heart with his sensitive personality and fun loving, youthful spirit. I was only 18, but somehow felt that the youthful presence in my life was a necessary one. After the first date, I agreed to call him my boyfriend and decided I could deal with the social fallout of being a “cougar” later. And I did. Most of my friends were skeptical and didn’t like our relationship, and after failing on multiple occasions to get them to give him a chance, I resigned myself to having two sides of my social life that could never cross paths.

Chris walked back down the stairs, looking excited about the smell of beef in the dining room. Sitting down, we said grace together, and then served the food.

“So, Casey. You’re a senior, you must be in the middle of college applications, right?” Danny’s mom asked me.

“Yeah, actually I -”

“Mom, Case didn’t come here to be interrogated about college, please let’s not stress her out more than she already is.”

“No no no, it’s okay, I don’t mind. Yes, I’m almost done with my apps actually, I’m only applying to three schools.” We went from there into a long conversation about college and my

future, how hard it was to find jobs after college, and the state of the economy today. We'd been talking nonstop for almost thirty minutes when I realized Danny hadn't said more than five words the entire time. His dad, on the other hand, was dominating the conversation. He was so smart, and he jumped on every opportunity to share his knowledge like he'd been waiting for someone to bring it up all night. He reminded me of Danny that way, of the way Danny could talk for hours about Lacrosse if he were given the chance. The sport took up all of Danny's life, and he was so passionate about it. He knew everything there was to know about it, and when he wasn't playing or re-stringing his stick, he was reading Lacrosse Magazine. When he'd get talking about his team or his gear I'd have to physically stop him from talking or he'd never shut up.

"So are you guys driving down to Hudson to see Danny's game this weekend?" I asked, glancing hopefully at Danny.

"Yes, of course! I haven't missed a game yet this season!" Mrs. Bloom said.

"Oh good, I'll see you guys there then!" I said, then looked over at Danny. "Do you know who you're playing yet?"

"Oh my god, this team is supposed to be *crazy* good. I heard they have this new full-back who's getting recruited to Duke as a sophomore!" Danny continued on like that for another few minutes. I was glad to get him into the conversation more, I didn't want it to feel like it was just me and his parents talking about "grown up stuff." I shifted in my seat to get a better view of Danny's growing excitement. I loved his dedication to his passion, and supported him at all his games. But watching his features glow the way they did when he really got into describing a player or game tactic, I wondered for the first time if I'd ever have a real conversation about world issues, the state of our country, or maybe politics. We discussed our relationship all the time. He was really mature and smart, but was completely uninterested in and clueless about more adult topics. This shouldn't have really matter to me, but it was just another downside of our age division.

"Unfortunately, Casey, we don't serve sweets in this house, so I'm sorry if you usually eat dessert after dinner. I just can't have my boys sleeping with all that sugar in their stomachs and teeth," Danny's mother explained after we'd begun to clear the plates.

"Oh, that's just fine with me I don't really eat desserts either," I lied. I had a ferocious sweet tooth and Danny knew it, too. I glanced his way to see if he was going to rat me out, but he

just winked. It was when Danny did little considerate and loving things like that that I could convince myself the other stupid stuff didn't matter.

"I know you're both just dying to, so go ahead upstairs and check the football scores, Casey and I will cleanup down here." Chris stood up and planted a kiss on his wife's cheek.

"That right there is why I love your mother, Dan." The boys went upstairs and I brought the stack of plates into the kitchen and towards the sink. I began washing a plate when Mrs. Bloom said she'd do it.

"Here, you just rinse and dry them Honey. We'll get a little train going here." She passed me soapy dishes and I'd rinse them and dry them with a rag. We did this for a few minutes in silence, and once we got to the silverware and serving bowls, she finally spoke up.

Mrs. Bloom put the bowl she was scrubbing down and put both hands on the counter. "So you and Danny, you... you two..." she paused. "Do you really like him?"

"I- uh, yes. Yes I do really like him, he's an amazing guy."

"Mmhmm, he is. Always has been. But the thing- um, well. I don't want to- well I do, but I don't want to come off- okay. Well, I'm just going to say it. I don't want you seeing my son anymore." She got those last words out and took her hands off the counter, turning her body towards mine and fixing her eyes upon me.

"I don't really understand. Uh, um can I- can I ask why?"

"You're eighteen right, Casey?"

"Yes, but I-"

"That's why. You're an adult, Casey, applying to college and talking about jobs. My son, my baby boy, just turned 15. He just graduated from *middle school* a few months ago. You may not mean to be, but you're a bad influence on him. I can't have my son going to upperclassmen parties and drinking and being around drugs and sex, he's 15!"

I was shocked into silence. Mrs. Bloom had transformed from the woman asking me all about colleges, my future, and my family into this woman who appeared to want me out of her house as soon as possible. It came out of nowhere! I was dressed respectably. I had been intelligent and charming in conversation. I treated Danny well. I honestly thought my first impression was going great.

“I’m sorry if this comes off as rude, but you’re just not what’s best for my son. You seem like a lovely young woman, but you’re an adult and I don’t have to outline all the social and *legal* reasons this relationship you guys have can’t work.”

I knew what she was hinting at, and I looked down at the tiled floor while my cheeks burned a vibrant pink. It’s not that neither of us wanted to have sex, believe me, we did. We just felt like we wanted to wait so it would be special. We didn’t want to be just another couple that has sex and breaks up a few weeks later.

“I understand, Mrs. Bloom, but we- we haven’t-, um, you don’t have to worry about that.”

“Honey, I was a teenage girl not too long ago and I remember all too well what happens when a pair has been dating for a few months. My son is too young, and I know he looks older than he is but that’s no excuse to break the law and *corrupt* my little boy,” she spoke, her hand coming up to her chest as she spoke.

For the first time since me and Danny started dating, I understood. My friends had tried, and my mother gave up her efforts too, but listening to Danny’s mom I really started to understand what it was people were getting at. It wasn’t whether or not Danny wanted to grow up or was already grown up, it was that he *shouldn’t* grow up. Not yet, not when he doesn’t have to. It was clear that she really believed what she had said, there were no hidden motives. She was protecting her son. Did I *really* love him? How could I even answer that, I was in high school, I didn’t know anything about love. I told Mrs. Bloom I understood her concerns and would think about it, and she pulled me into a tight embrace. I remember so vividly being there in her arms, and feeling like with that hug she was transferring the job of protecting Danny to me; like she was saying now it was my turn to do the hard part.

“I won’t hurt him, Mrs. Bloom. I promise. I love him, and I- , I wouldn’t hurt him,” I said into her shoulder.

She let me go. “Sweetie, you’re going to have to.”

If I had that night to do over again, I wouldn’t have left like I did; I would’ve stayed and fought harder for Danny. I didn’t know then that after all the men I’ve dated in the years since highschool, I wouldn’t experience anything like Danny Bloom since I broke both of our hearts that fall. I let his parents, my parents, my friends, and society tell me that we weren’t capable of love and that what I felt for him was because of his looks and the allure of his youth.

I left the Bloom's house that night in a daze. I couldn't believe what had just happened and was in denial. I was so caught up in my own thoughts I barely remember saying goodbye. The fog didn't clear until I was standing just outside of my car on the cold, now-empty street. Danny walked me to my car and was about to begin the inevitable post-dinner debrief. I turned my back to the car and let my eyes rise from their previously fixed position on my feet. My eyes met his and my chest physically compressed with all the emotion I felt right then just looking at him.

Danny took both of my hands and moved closer until we were both leaning against my car. "I know that wasn't easy, but I think they really liked you. I told them you were older and they were pretty skeptical," he said with a brief smile, "but I told them love doesn't have an age requirement." He kissed me. "They just needed to meet you to understand what I meant."

I knew I was about to unravel, and couldn't have Danny there when it happened. I told him that the dinner was great and his parents were amazing. I kissed him once, and feeling tears start to burn their way to the brim of my eyes, I pulled back and kissed him on the cheek, turning to unlock my car before he could see I was crying. I drove away that night knowing his mother had been right, and understanding what had to be done.