

# The Last Kiss

by  
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Seventeen years. It seemed longer sometimes, whenever I would look at the calendar and wonder how every day seemed to have an X marked on it. I couldn't remember crossing out all those days, but seventeen calendars full of Xs were proof. I wasn't imagining the length of time. There was no mischievous imp to blame, destroying my sense of what day it was, what week, what year. The time had passed, and I hadn't even noticed until now how stupefyingly long it had been since that day.

There is no longer any reason to mark the days, I thought, and put down my pen. Danielle had been gone for seventeen years, and there wasn't any reason to wait for her.

I decided to go to the kitchen. A cup of tea sounded lovely and warm, especially given the cold eastern wind that rattled my little cottage like it was a toy. One, two, three... It took twelve steps to get from my living room to the kitchen, going my normal pace. I took the kettle to the sink, debating for a moment between waiting for the water to warm, or merely filling the kettle with cold water and letting the stove warm it at its own pace. I chose the latter and set it on the burner.

This action had taken three minutes and twenty-seven seconds, starting from the time I stood up to when I turned on the stove.

Those three minutes had been painfully obvious to me the entire time. How had I missed seventeen years?

Thinking of her, I felt a warmth on my lips from her last kiss, sweet and quick. It didn't hurt to remember it exactly, but I knew that later tonight I would cry. There wasn't anything shameful about that fact—I cried almost every night, like clockwork. Every night, it was the same.

First, I would change out of my clothing and put on a nightdress. Then I would brush my teeth and unbraided my hair. Finally, I would lie down in bed, turn off the light, and cry into my pillow until I felt like I could stop.

There wasn't anything wrong with that. There wasn't anything bad. There was only a memory: Danielle stopping at my desk after class...



"Excuse me, Ms. Addens? Could I speak with you for a moment? About the assignment?"

The sunlight through our classroom window had caught her hair, reflecting gold. I'd seen her in class before, of course—an eight-grader with her candlelight hair and lowered eyes—but I hadn't *noticed* her exactly. She was before me now, however, and I could see things then that I hadn't before. The way her hands clung together, like two frightened girls, afraid of the night. There was her school uniform, neat and buttoned to the very top, the skirt showing her bare knees. Her simple, practical shoes and dark blue knee socks embedded themselves in my mind.

I agreed to help her with her assignment. I spent longer than necessary on the details, asking her questions about herself in between editing and research notations.

"What's your favourite colour?"

"Do you have any pets?"

"What are your dreams?"

She came to my desk every day. At first, all she'd talk about was the assignment, but eventually she forgot it entirely, instead telling me about her life. I learned how her father never talked to her anymore, how her mother spent all her time at church functions but never at actual mass. Her brother had died of leukaemia when she was a small child. The day he'd died had closed off her family forever. They were strangers, she said. They might live in the same house, but no one knew anything about one another.

"Are you always alone?" I asked her.

"No, not really. I'm at school or the library almost all the time now. I go home only to sleep."

I shook my head, keeping my smile as soft as possible. Each time Danielle visited, her posture and manner of speaking reminded me of a fawn; always alert, always ready to run.

"A person can be alone in a room crowded with people. You know that."

Danielle looked down at her hands. "Yes, I do know that. It seems like that almost all the time."

"Almost?" I asked. There was something in her voice just then. Like she had failed to catch herself from saying something unwanted.

She hesitated before answering. "...yes."

"Then, when do you *not* feel alone?"

She continued to stare at her hands for such a long while that I thought at first that she wasn't going to say anything at all. I opened my mouth, ready to apologise for prying, when she responded.

"I... The only time I don't feel alone is when... when I'm with you."

I glanced up, startled, and she was staring at me, looking directly into my eyes. A blush was lit upon her cheeks. She was obviously embarrassed, but she didn't look away.

Since I'd first seen her that day in the classroom, I'd known that she was beautiful, but never had that fact been more apparent than at that moment. I could almost feel my heart in my chest, loudly beating again and again, as I gazed into her blue eyes, warm and expectant and shy.

"I feel the same way, Danielle," I said, grateful that my voice didn't catch in my throat. I felt excited, like a kid right before Christmas morning when the packages were still unopened, but scared as well. She was so beautiful. I didn't deserve anyone as beautiful as her in my life.

"I'm glad," she said, still watching me, still looking carefully at my face as though to seek out any derision. Apparently, whatever she saw there alarmed her, for she continued in an anxious tone, "No, really! I *am* glad. I've never felt..." she paused, grasping for words before she continued. "You understand... me, I think. You actually listen when I speak. That's never happened before. Most of the time, whenever I talk to people, they're just waiting for me to finish, so they can start saying whatever it is they want to say."

She trailed off, and her eyes flicked away from mine. She was embarrassed. Any moment now, she would apologise and leave the room, ashamed and let down. I knew this because this was how *I* behaved. Whenever I became close to someone, someone who could, with a scornful look and a derisive laugh, destroy me, I would back away and never return for fear of being found out.

Too long. I waited too long. Danielle opened her mouth, and the words came out—words that I knew so well. "I'm sorry. I think I overstepped my... you know. I'm sorry."

She reached down to grab her school bag and got up to leave the room. It was happening now, just as it had happened when I had done it, a thousand times before. I thought I would just sit there and let it all occur. After all, she was a student, and I was a teacher, fifteen years her elder. It was improper, illegal and, not to mention, professional suicide. There was no logical reason to impede her retreat.

There was no logic...

"Wait, Danielle!" I cried out. I didn't sound calm anymore. My voice was cracked and higher-pitched.

She stopped, her hand on the knob of the door, and turned around to look at me with her big blue eyes.

"Yes, Ms. Addens?"

I paused before I got up from behind my desk and walked over to where she stood.

"Please, call me Erin."

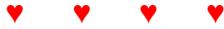
Tremulously, I reached up with an uneven hand and touched her cheek, slowly stroking it with my fingers. Her skin was so soft, so perfect. Even though I knew at any moment she would jerk away from me, slap me across the face, and scream, "Dyke! Lesbo!" in a justified rage, I knew I would forever remember the touch of her skin.

After that brief moment, I pulled my hand away from her face and looked aside. It would come. Any second now, the rage would begin, and I would be revealed to the world for my sins. Any moment...

"Would you like to go out for a walk with me, Erin?"

I jerked my head towards her, my heart pounding. She was smiling at me, a blush still on her cheeks. She stood there, radiating nothing but absolute sweetness. So young, so unsure of herself, yet so beautiful.

"Yes, Danni," I whispered. "Yes, I'd rather enjoy that."



The shriek of the kettle interrupted my reverie, and I got up from the sofa to remove it from the stove. I counted twelve steps into the kitchen, then three more to get to the cupboard for a tea cup. I poured the water in and added the tea bag, stirring it with a teaspoon from the drawer.

Twelve steps back to the couch, and I was done. There was nothing left to do today, nothing on the agenda. Staring out the window at the pine trees in my yard, I slipped back into the memory.



We'd been together for a month following that fateful day. It had been Danielle's last month in my class before school let out for the summer and when her school holidays started. I finally felt safe enough to go out into more popular places with her. We'd spend entire weekends riding our bicycles or walking along the beach, seeing the local museums and attractions during the day, making love in the evenings before she had to return home for the night. Occasionally, people would give us strange looks, but there was nothing overt. And as Danielle would say, why would we bother to notice the expressions of strangers when we had each other?

She just turned fourteen and had to report to her parents, but more and more often she would visit my townhouse and spend the night under the pretext of having a sleepover at one of her school friends' places. And even though it was still years away, it was almost unspoken that she would move in with me when she turned eighteen. I like to think that she was excited about the prospect of spending each day with me. I certainly was.

A week before the new school year started, she asked if we could go out on a date at a restaurant outside of town. I'd never heard of it, which was peculiar since I'd been near the area for almost five years now, but Danielle insisted that it was an excellent place to eat, so we ended up going.

The restaurant was a small, dingy place that served traditional Italian food. The entire place smelled of pizza and pasta, and with every breath, I was reminded of the house I grew up in and my grandmother's cooking.

"Do you like it?" she asked me anxiously as I took it all in.

"It's lovely," I assured her, walking with her to the table.

Feeling defiant and reckless, I ordered wine with dinner—the more expensive imported French vintage—in honour of the cuisine. The alcohol made us careless. We were at a table near the corner, which gave us the illusion of privacy, and Danielle began to stroke my hand with her fingers. I smiled at her and whispered for her to quit, but that only made her do it more.

Ever since our relationship began, she had been getting more and more confident. I loved watching her change and grow. She had now begun to do things on her own, make her own choices as to what she wanted to do with her time. The Italian restaurant idea, for instance. During the beginning of our relationship, she would never even offer suggestions as to what she wanted to do, but after a few weeks, she'd gained enough self-confidence to tell me what she wanted. To actually pick a restaurant was quite an achievement. I was proud of her. And I decided to tell her so.

"Oh, stop it, Erin," she smiled, and I laughed. I leaned forward to tell her something, undoubtedly about how tipsy I was feeling, when the impulse grabbed me and I reached over and kissed her on the mouth.

She was startled at first—although we'd held hands in public before, we'd never kissed—but then relaxed into it. Her warm lips felt wonderful on mine—soft and comforting and tangy with wine. I closed my eyes, enjoying the feeling, when I heard a gasp.

*Oh shit*, I thought, and broke away from her instantly. I knew I shouldn't be so affected by the opinions of others, but nonetheless, I was terrified of hurtful comments from strangers, of the things they could say about us. Me, especially, because it was clear as day to everyone that Danielle was a minor, and yet here I was, kissing her on the lips and plying her with alcohol.

I glanced over at the woman who made the noise. It was an older lady, perhaps in her fifties, but her expression of disgust wasn't aimed at me but rather at Danielle.

Gathering my courage, I turned towards Danielle to make some sort of disarming comment about how rude people were these days, but she was staring back at the woman with a look of horror.

"Danni?" I asked, a question in my voice.

She glanced back at me, tears in her eyes. "Erin, I... I'm sorry. I have to go."

"But why?"

She turned towards the woman again before flinching back. The woman had thrown her napkin onto her plate and was getting up from her chair. Danielle started to rise as well.

Pushing her chair in automatically, she leaned over and whispered in my ear. "That's my mother. I have to go explain to her. I can't just let her see us together and not give her any explanation."

"But..." I started, thinking that I should go with her and help support her, but she shushed me before I could finish.

"I have to do this *alone*, Erin. I've told you about my family. She'd never make a scene in public, but I know her. And we need to talk."

"Okay," I whispered. A part of me was screaming not to let her face this ordeal alone, to stand up and protect her from the inevitable argument that was going to come, but a stronger part of me kept me from rising. Who was I to help her with her mother? I'd never told my parents a thing about my preferences, nor anyone else. Danielle had more courage than I ever had at her age. Who was I, the coward, to offer support?

The woman gave Danielle a glaring, pointed look and then began marching towards the front door. Danielle automatically began to follow, but then jerked herself to a stop before taking more than a few steps. Turning back towards me, despite all the other curious patrons in the restaurant, she rose on her tiptoes and kissed me one last time on the lips.

It was the most fleeting of touches, but today, no matter where I am and no matter what situation I'm in, I can still remember what it felt like—that one brief kiss.

After that, she turned around and left the restaurant without another glance behind.

I never saw her again.



Afterwards, I started keeping calendars. Time seemed too precious to leave unchecked. A moment might seem like it would last forever, but I knew that at any second, the entire world could change.

Danielle wouldn't have just left me. I know this today, and I almost knew it then, but there was that voice inside of me, nagging and doubting. It pointed out the obvious; it was all my fault. I was older and responsible for her. I was her teacher and she was only fourteen, of course she would leave me. She probably just decided to do it then, at the restaurant, before things got too complicated with the move. But most likely, her parents put a stop to it. Maybe even contacted the authorities, and any day now I will be receiving a visit from the police, and that will be the end of my job, my future, and my life.

I'd believed this voice for the longest time. The fact that she hadn't said goodbye to me, not even during the entire month after the incident at the restaurant, didn't cause me to panic or worry about her. As pathetic of an excuse as it seems, it honestly didn't cross my mind that she hadn't left me willingly.

An entire month, and I never even worried about her.

Then they found the bodies.

"Horrible Accident Kills Mother and Daughter" screamed the headlines of the local newspaper. They'd found the minivan at the bottom of a nearby lake, just beneath the cliff where a highway wound its way across the city. The guardrail had been busted open by another car accident earlier that same week, destroying the section completely. That particular wreck didn't involve any fatalities. The road was cleared again for traffic soon after.

But with the lack of a guardrail and no telltale signs of skid marks, no one could tell that another accident had taken place on the exact same spot. An entire month passed before they discovered the wreck... and the bodies.

I'd driven on that road, past that very spot, every day on my way to work for that entire horrible month. Unaware of her, floating in a locked, sunken metallic hulk, dead corpse eyes staring blindly at me from the water... Danielle had the most beautiful blue eyes.

The newspapers claimed that it was an accident. There were no signs of foul play, they wrote. There wasn't anything to indicate that the accident was nothing more than a case of incautious driving.

But the newspapers hadn't seen Danielle's mother at the restaurant. They hadn't witnessed the look on her face—the absolute disgust and cold disdain.

I told no one what I knew.

I mourned in my own way, quietly, and eventually managed to get work at a different school. I couldn't drive on the highway anymore. In my home, I couldn't even open the blinds, lest the light get inside and remind me of her hair. I was paralysed by the memories.

So I moved, got a new job, and found a new place in an attempt to start a new life.

That was when the counting started.

Time was precious. Every second without a tragedy was something to be noticed, to be treasured. So I would count my steps, making sure to take in each moment that the world was not pulled out from under me. It got so far that I couldn't stop, and eventually, it was all I could do to concentrate on the numbers.

They went on endlessly. I could count forever, every second of every day, and still never reach the end of the numbers. Counting was a glimpse into the eternal. The numbers would last forever.

Unlike people.

I've never been with another girl since Danielle. I've already ruined one life with my presence. I do not think I could stand to ruin another.

So here I sit, in my cottage, as my tea grows cold and the windstorm rages outside my window. Every day, for the last seventeen years, I count the minutes as they go by, each one more precious and finite than the last.

The End